

Does God Allow Us to Choose Our Own Religious Holidays?

Many think that under the New Covenant they have freedom to worship God however they want, including deciding on their own days of worship. But what does the Bible say?

by David Treybig

As we approach the season to be jolly, millions of people around the world prepare to celebrate the birthday of Jesus Christ. For many of them, Christmastime is the most enjoyable season of the year, and they eagerly look forward to it. Many sincerely honor

is demonstrably not the date, or even the time of year, of Christ's birth. Indeed, ancient pagan peoples chose the date because of its association with the worship of their gods.

Another popular day of worship, Easter, is considered one of the most holy in all Christendom,

As almost any encyclopedia will confirm, the symbols and customs commonly associated with Christmas and Easter came down to us, not from Christianity, but from pre-Christian practices the pagans used in worshipping their deities.



Jesus Christ during the season and praise Him and God the Father for Their role in making possible our salvation.

However, as almost any encyclopedia will confirm, the symbols and customs commonly associated with Christmas—evergreen trees, holly, mistletoe, Yule logs, candles and the exchanging of gifts—came down to us, not from Christianity, but from pre-Christian practices the pagans used in worshipping their deities. Even the date on which Christmas is commonly celebrated, December 25,

with many celebrating that day as the commemoration of Christ's resurrection. However, as with Christmas, Easter is nowhere sanctioned in the Bible as a proper custom for Christians. The practices associated with Easter likewise can easily be proven to be pagan in their origins.

But does the pagan origin of a holiday make any difference to God?

Many people believe that the origins of such customs do not matter to God and that He allows mankind to determine its own ways and days of

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worshipping Him. They assume that God will accept any form of religious practice so long as the worshipers mean it to honor Him.

What does the Bible say about this assumption?

Instructive for us in this study are two lessons from the Bible, both having to do with ancient Israel. As we look at these lessons, let's bear in mind the apostle Paul's words: "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Paul said events recorded in the Bible "were written for our learning" (Romans 15:4).

Let us notice carefully what happened in two situations and, most important, what God thinks of people deciding on their own how to worship Him.

Israel and the tragedy of the golden calf

Early in the history of Holy Day observance, ancient Israel learned an important lesson from trying to establish its own ways of worship. Shortly after God delivered the Israelites from Egypt and instructed them concerning the Holy Days of Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, He began to reveal to them more about His laws. As part of doing so, God told Moses to climb Mount Sinai, where He would speak directly to him.

When Moses' stay on Mount Sinai grew longer than the Israelites had expected, they began to look to Moses' brother, Aaron, as their leader (Exodus 32:1).

After having lived in Egypt all their lives, the Israelites were used to Egyptian forms of worship. Tragically, under Aaron's lax leadership, they reverted to familiar pagan practices. They decided to worship God in accordance with common, traditional practices of their day. At Aaron's suggestion, they donated their golden earrings as the raw material to make a golden calf, similar to idols the Egyptians worshiped (verses 2-4).

Verses 4-5 record Moses' brother telling the other Israelites, "This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!" Aaron built an altar, then proclaimed to the people, "Tomorrow is a feast to the LORD."

Aaron didn't just induce the Israelites to practice idolatry; he took it upon himself to

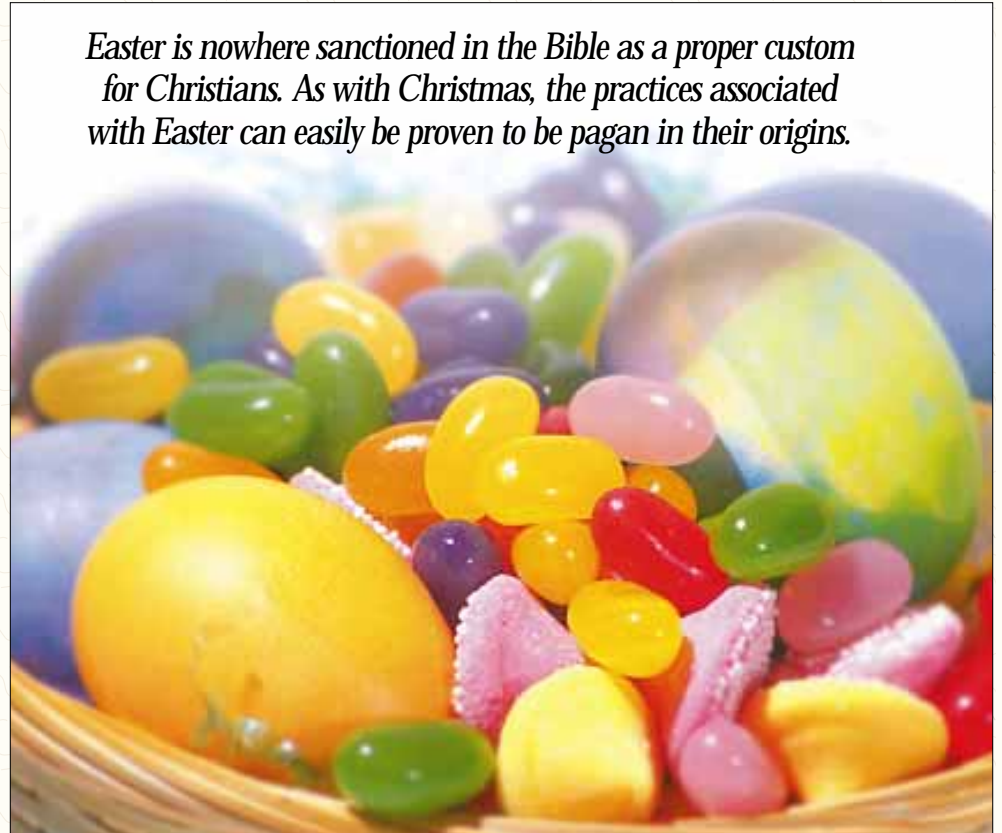
set a day of worship. He assumed that he could establish "a feast to the LORD." The people took the matter a step further. Verse 6 says they "rose up to play," a phrase that refers to sexual immorality. In explaining this verse, *The New Bible Commentary: Revised* says it refers to an "orgiastic dance, which characterized pagan religions" (p. 137).

The incident of the golden calf embroiled diverse cultural practices; godly elements such as burnt offerings and sacrifices were mixed with pagan customs of

powder, added it to their water supply and ordered them to drink it (verse 20). As they imbibed the polluted fluid, it became in their mouths a bitter reminder of their disobedience to God.

Equally insightful is Moses' fervid question of Aaron after these unholy events: "What did this people do to you that you have brought so great a sin upon them?" (verse 21). Moses recognized the violation as a great sin. Indeed, the incident cost 3,000 men their lives (verse 26-28). Moses sought God's forgiveness from the

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idolatry and sexual immorality. An ungodly agglomeration is evident today when people combine paganism with the teachings of the Bible.

God's view of religious experimentation

Israel's experiment with a questionable, self-made, ostensibly holy day abruptly turned tragic. God told Moses to descend the mountain immediately because the people "have corrupted themselves" (Exodus 32:7). God's anger flared, and He was ready to destroy the people because of what they had done (verse 10). Only Moses' pleadings on behalf of Israel persuaded God to relent (verses 11-14).

To bring home the gravity of their mistake, Moses ground the golden calf into

Israelites' "great sin" (verses 30-31).

Subsequent scriptures summarize the enormity of the situation. Besides the men who died, God punished the congregation as a whole for its actions (verse 35). Because of the golden-calf incident, God said He could no longer stay in the midst of the people, and they rightfully mourned the change in their relationship with their Creator (Exodus 33:3-4). God then warned them again to avoid the pagan practices of other peoples and to observe His Holy Days (Exodus 34:12-18, 21-22).

Notably, the importance of keeping God's Holy Days is specifically mentioned in Exodus 31 and again in chapter 34—both before and after Israel's experiment with the golden calf of chapter 32. In

Moses' absence, Israel learned a bitter lesson from attempting to establish its own days and customs of worship.

Israel forgets

Sadly, the people of Israel forgot the lesson they had learned. Years later, when Israel divided into the separate kingdoms of Israel and Judah, Jeroboam, the first king of the kingdom of Israel, made the same tragic mistake.

In 925 B.C., shortly after King Solomon's death, the 12 tribes of Israel divided into two nations. Ten of the tribes rebelled against Rehoboam, the son of Solomon, who had assumed the throne. So these tribes, which then established the northern kingdom of Israel, came under the rule of Jeroboam. Rehoboam continued to reign over two tribes, which became known as Judah, or the southern kingdom.

Even though God had promised Jeroboam He would allot him 10 tribes (1 Kings 11:31), the northern king was afraid he would lose his kingdom if the people visited Jerusalem (in the south) to worship according to divine instructions (1 Kings 12:27). Under these circumstances, Jeroboam made two fateful decisions: He created two golden calves for his subjects to worship (verse 28), and he "ordained a feast on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, like the feast that was in Judah" (verse 32). This festival was a counterfeit of the Feast of Tabernacles, which begins on the 15th day of the seventh month (Leviticus 23:34), exactly one month earlier than Jeroboam's bogus feast.

"So he made offerings on the altar which he had made at Bethel on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, in the month which he had devised in his own heart. And he ordained a feast for the children of Israel, and offered sacrifices on the altar and burned incense" (1 Kings 12:33). This verse clearly shows us that Jeroboam had no authority from God to alter the Holy Days; he did this entirely on his own.

"After this event Jeroboam did not turn from his evil way, but again he made priests from every class of people for the high places; whoever wished, he consecrated him, and he became one of the priests of the high places. And this thing was the sin of the house of Jeroboam, so as to exterminate and destroy it from the face of the earth" (1 Kings 13:33-34).

God's judgment on Jeroboam

We just read that Jeroboam continued "his evil way." He did not learn the lesson of the golden calf from Israel's history. He repeated the same sins of idolatry and attempting to establish his own days of worship. Because of his actions, God told him, through the prophet Ahijah, that disaster would befall his household: God said He would "cut off from Jeroboam every male in Israel, bond and free; I will take

Has God changed His mind on these matters? Is it permissible nowadays to substitute pagan, nonbiblical celebrations and traditions for the Holy Days He commanded in the Bible?

away the remnant of the house of Jeroboam, as one takes away refuse until it is all gone. The dogs shall eat whoever belongs to Jeroboam and dies in the city, and the birds of the air shall eat whoever dies in the field; for the LORD has spoken!" (1 Kings 14:10-11).

Why did God pronounce a death sentence on Jeroboam and his descendants? He reminded Jeroboam that "you have done more evil than all who were before you, for you have gone and made for yourself other gods and molded images to provoke Me to anger, and have cast Me behind your back" (verse 9).

God did not hold the people blameless for following Jeroboam's counterfeit religion. God also pronounced punishment on Israel as a people: "For the LORD will strike Israel, as a reed is shaken in the water. He will uproot Israel from this good land which He gave to their fathers, and will scatter them beyond the River, because they have made their wooden images, provoking the LORD to anger. And He will give Israel up because of the sins of Jeroboam, who sinned and who made Israel sin" (verses 15-16). God later carried out this punishment, allowing soldiers of the Assyrian army to take Israel captive beyond the Euphrates River.

Such were the tragic consequences of two attempts by people to establish their own days of worship.

Don't interfere with God's instructions

What does God say about appropriating elements of other religions to worship Him? His instructions are clear. After wandering with the Israelites in the wilderness for 40 years, Moses, just before his death, reminded them of God's warning not to

worship Him as other nations worshiped their gods.

"When the LORD your God cuts off from before you the nations which you go to dispossess, and you displace them and dwell in their land," Moses advised, "take heed to yourself that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed from before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, 'How did these nations serve their gods? I also will

do likewise.' *You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way; for every abomination to the LORD which He hates they have done to their gods; for they burn even their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods. Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to nor take away from it*" (Deuteronomy 12:29-32).

This passage specifically informed the Israelites that they were not to adopt the pagan ways of worship practiced by the nations around them. God also said to follow His instructions *exactly*; they were not to add anything to or take anything away from His instructions.

Has God changed?

Ask yourself: Has God changed His mind on these matters? Is it permissible nowadays to substitute pagan, nonbiblical celebrations and traditions for the Holy Days He commanded in the Bible? Do we have the right to select any days or practices we wish to use in worshiping God and expect to impress Him with our worship?

Hundreds of years after the Israelites' wanderings in the wilderness, God warned any who would ignore His commands: "I am the LORD, *I do not change*" (Malachi 3:6). Then, after the beginning of the New Testament Church, we find the writer of the letter to the Hebrews emphasizing that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Hebrews 13:8).

At the end of the book of Revelation, we find similar instructions not to add anything to or to take anything away from God's words (Revelation 22:18-19). The Bible is clear, and God's instructions are consistent. He does not permit humans to replace His Holy Days with days of their own devising. **GN**

Why Do We Sin?

All of us have to deal with sin and its tragic consequences in our lives. Understanding why we sin is a first step in overcoming and avoiding sin.

by Roger Foster

Sin is a universal human problem. It's something we all do. But have you ever stopped to ask why? Why can't we make a studied decision not to sin and then never again disobey God?

The apostle Paul eloquently expressed our frustration with sin: "For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do" (Romans 7:15).

Not everyone wants to sin. But everyone does. Again, why? Why do we so often fall short of God's standards and our own expectations?

Here's the reason

The Greek word most commonly translated "sin" simply means "to miss the mark"—to fail to adhere to the righteous standards God has set for us. Paul expressed the same concept, lamenting that "all have sinned and *fall short of the glory of God*" (Romans 3:23, emphasis added throughout). Through His Word, God reveals the proper standards for our behavior. When we miss the mark, or fall short of those standards, we sin.

Because he was a physical being just like us, Paul knew that sin "*dwells in me*. For I know that in me (that is, *in my flesh*) nothing good dwells; for *to will* is present with me, but how *to perform* what is good I do not find" (Romans 7:16-18). We have limited natural ability to properly live up to right standards and values. We repeatedly fall short of the honorable conduct God expects of us.

Paul explained why. We sin, or miss the mark, because of something that *dwells in us*, in our flesh. Jesus identifies the most significant characteristic of the "flesh," or our nature, that causes sin. "Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matthew 26:41). It is the *weakness of the flesh* that gives birth to sin. Let's understand just how this works.

Like Paul, Jesus explained that we may be willing—have the desire—to do what is right, yet we fail because our resolve is weak; our flesh is susceptible to temptation. We capitulate to sin when inappropriate enticements are sufficiently appealing. What is the nature of our "flesh" (our physical existence, including our mind) that makes us so weak, that stimulates us to cave in to those desires?

Before we can fully appreciate the answer to that question, we must understand our own

nature—exactly what we are. We are physical beings created with a material constitution similar to that of animals. We share with animals a biochemical composition. Our life-support systems of breath and blood are essentially the same (Ecclesiastes 3:18-20; Genesis 9:4-5). God created us as living souls—breathing physical beings—from the dust of the earth (Genesis 2:7).

The translation of the Hebrew *nephesh* as "living soul" doesn't mean we humans have some sort of "immortal soul" in a physical body. Nor does it imply that man is some type of spirit encased in a material body. In plain language, *living soul* means we are living, breathing fleshly beings, biochemical entities fashioned from the dust of the earth.

Our physical bodies subject us to weaknesses that can lead to sin. Jesus and Paul both said so. Our flesh is not inherently evil, but it *is* inherently weak. As a result, our pulls and appetites tempt us to sin.

James also plainly states that sin is generated through our human desires, because "each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, *it gives birth to sin . . .*" (James 1:14-15).

Deliverance only through Christ

Paul alluded to the magnitude of the problem when he said, "O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Romans 7:24). Paul's own answer: "I thank God—*through Jesus Christ our Lord!* So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin" (verse 25).

Paul makes it abundantly clear that sin springs from *uncontrolled* desires. Our only hope for deliverance is the help and strength we receive through Jesus Christ. "Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren . . . For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted" (Hebrews 2:17-18).

Is desire always bad? When Paul said, "For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells" (Romans 7:18), did he mean that every desire of our fleshly bodies is evil?

Certainly not!

He could have said, just as accurately, "I know that in my flesh dwells nothing that is inherently evil," because the flesh, in and of itself, is neutral in regard to sin and righteousness. After God had fin-

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ished His creation, including Adam and Eve, whose bodies were no different from ours, He observed “everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). Nothing that God made was *inherently* evil.

Even our own observations should confirm that the appetites and needs that are natural to our bodies have good and healthy purposes. If we felt no hunger for food, we would die of starvation. But that same desire, when not properly controlled, can lead to overindulgence and gluttony. The natural desires or appetites of the flesh are not in themselves sinful; the way we *direct, manage* or *control* our appetites makes them good or evil. Without desires, our lives would be boring and practically useless. Desires serve as motivating forces in our lives. That is why God created the bodily mechanisms that stimulate desires within us. They are much needed.

Our challenge, then, is to manage our desires. God expects us to seek and use His help to direct them into legitimate channels. While defending himself before the Roman governor, Felix, the apostle Paul “reasoned about righteousness, *self-control*, and the judgment to come” (Acts 24:25). The need to maintain self-control is one of the major teachings of the gospel. Paul admonishes us to “make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts” (Romans 13:14). Rather, we must properly control our desires so they do not become sinful lusts.

John summarizes the scope of the problem as “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life” (1 John 2:16). Improperly managed, unrestrained desires stimulate these basic categories of sin.

What is lust?

Lust is nothing more than misdirected or improperly controlled desire. All lust is desire, but not all desire is lust. Lust is harmful desires that break principles of God’s law. The law of God defines proper limits, for our behavior as well as for our thoughts, “for by the law is the knowledge of sin” (Romans 3:20). Commandments forbidding us to steal or commit adultery place boundaries on our behavior. The command not to covet places limits on how we think, how we control our desires.

Taking your neighbor’s car without permission—that is, stealing—is a sin. Even *desiring* to take your neighbor’s car without permission is a sin, that of coveting. Conversely, wanting to own the same type of car as your neighbor’s is a legitimate desire,

provided you desire to acquire it legally and responsibly.

Likewise, desiring your neighbor’s mate is a sin. But it is not a sin to desire to be married—provided, again, your approach is lawful and responsible.

A misunderstanding of Jesus’ words when He said that “whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:28) has brought about much unnecessary and hopeless frustration. Some have misinterpreted Jesus’ words to mean that *any* type of sexual attraction is a sin. That is not what Jesus meant. Let’s make sure we do

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not misinterpret what He said.

Jesus condemned lust—out-of-control, unlawful desires. He did not condemn men or women who, having a legitimate desire to marry, find members of the opposite sex attractive and desirable. Jesus condemned sinful desires for *sexual immorality*, not the legitimate sexual attraction that leads to courtship and marriage. Desire is lust when it rages out of control.

Emotions and pride

Our human nature affects far more than do our conscious desires. It stimulates powerful feelings or emotions, some good, some evil. For instance, we are capable of intense love or bitter hatred. Our emotions can be beneficial and wonderful, or they can be destructive and sinful. Feelings such as bitterness, envy, malice and jealousy are listed among the sinful works of the flesh in Paul’s writings (Romans 1:29; Galatians 5:19-21).

Pride, the feeling or perception that one is superior in some way to others, destroys human relationships. The desire for self-exaltation lies at the root of an impressive array of sins.

Paul alerts Timothy to the destructive influence that people who are motivated by pride have on the attitudes of others: “If anyone teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which accords with godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing, but is obsessed with disputes and arguments over words, *from which come* envy, strife, reviling, evil suspicions, useless wranglings of men of

corrupt minds and destitute of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a means of gain. From such withdraw yourself” (1 Timothy 6:3-5).

We are told, “Everyone *proud in heart* is an abomination to the LORD; though they join forces, none will go unpunished” (Proverbs 16:5). And “pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall” (verse 18). Peter exhorts that “all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for ‘*God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble*’” (1 Peter 5:5).

Temptations to sin are not limited to

our ineffective human ability to control our desires. Our weaknesses can be manipulated, and they are—to a degree that astonishes most people when they discover the extent of the machinations. The great manipulator is Satan. He has successfully deceived the whole world (Revelation 12:9).

Satan the tempter

How does Satan take advantage of our weaknesses, our vulnerability to temptation? “But I fear,” said Paul, “lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so *your minds may be corrupted* from the simplicity that is in Christ” (2 Corinthians 11:3). Satan is a master at maneuvering the human mind, actually influencing the way we think. He persuaded Eve to believe that God had lied to her and forbidden her to acquire something that could give her understanding of good and evil, making her as wise as Himself. The devil aroused her emotions and kindled resentment and rebellion in her. Suddenly self-willed, she took matters into her own hands (Genesis 3:1-6).

Satan did all this by directing and influencing emotions, feelings and desires. That is how human sin began: through a combination of human weakness and the pernicious influence of a master manipulator. And Satan has not decreased his efforts!

Peter admonishes us to “be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. *Resist him*, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood

in the world” (1 Peter 5:8-9).

Paul told exactly how to resist Satan: “Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:11-12).

Jesus indicted the religious leaders of His day: “You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do” (John 8:44). Satan knows just what to concentrate on: human desires. He even

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tried to entice Jesus, seeking to control the Messiah Himself (Matthew 4:1-10).

Notice Satan’s technique in this attempt. First the devil, as the tempter, endeavored to exploit Christ’s physical hunger (He had been fasting for 40 days) to persuade Him to place His desire for food ahead of the purpose of His fast. Next Satan appealed to pride, tempting Jesus to prove that He enjoyed infinite protection from physical harm. Then Satan made a direct bid for Jesus to worship him in exchange for “all the kingdoms of the world and their glory” (verse 8), appealing to the all-too-common human tendency to grasp for power and prestige.

A blinded world

Satan, the de-facto god of this world, has succeeded in *blinding* humanity (2 Corinthians 4:4; Revelation 12:9). Except for the few who have turned to God through repentance, that blindness is universal. Paul said one who wants to obey God “should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind, *having their understanding darkened*, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of *the blindness of their heart*” (Ephesians 4:17-19).

The mind of a blinded man or woman—confused and influenced by both the lusts of the flesh and the wiles of the devil—is what is referred to in the Scriptures as a “*carnal mind*”: “For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the

Spirit. For to be *carnally minded* is death, but to be *spiritually minded* is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be” (Romans 8:5-7). Notice that Paul defines a carnal mind as a mind set “*on the things of the flesh.*”

To illustrate the degree of human subjugation to the pulls and desires of human nature, as they are influenced and manipulated by Satan, Paul uses the analogy of slavery. “Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one’s slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obe-

dience leading to righteousness? But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness” (Romans 6:16-18).

Not saved by the law

God’s law is a perfect law (Psalm 19:7). It is holy, just and spiritual (Romans 7:12, 14). It defines sin (verse 7), but it cannot prevent it. It gives us *knowledge* of the weaknesses of human nature, but it provides no power to *subdue* the flesh; that is, the carnal mind.

The power to rule over our human impulses and desires comes only through the Spirit of God. “I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and *you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh.* For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish” (Galatians 5:16-17).

“So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God. But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you” (Romans 8:8-9). “There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death” (verses 1-2).

We all occasionally succumb to the temptation to sin, even after we surrender our wills to God and work as active servants of Jesus Christ. “If we say that we have no

sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8). But we should strive never to sin again.

Therefore “let us lay aside every weight, and the sin *which so easily ensnares us*, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls” (Hebrews 12:1-3).

Paul reveals the effort he put into disciplining his own body: the source of the desires that tempted him to sin. “Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. *But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection*, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified” (1 Corinthians 9:24-27).

Proper perspective

Later Paul admits and explains that he had never attained perfection in his efforts to discipline himself not to sin. But he gives us a perspective we should adopt: “Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, *forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead*, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:13-14).

Not only must we resist sin; we must also be willing to assist others in their efforts. “Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins” (James 5:19-20).

We should take care to avoid conceit and overconfidence, deceiving ourselves about our vulnerability to sin. We should forever be aware that we are easily tempted by carnal desires, but never surrender to discouragement or defeat. We, like Paul, should always press forward toward the goal of being like Jesus Christ. **GN**

Gentleness: The Mark of a Christian

Gentleness, so sadly lacking in this world, should be evident in the life of a Christian. What is gentleness, and how can it be a part of your life?

by Noel Hornor

I love those dear hearts and gentle people who live in my home town. Because those dear hearts and gentle people will never, ever let you down." The words of this song, written 47 years ago by Bob Hilliard, call to mind a time when the world was (at least in our collective memory) a more neighborly place. Do you sometimes find yourself wishing for those times? Do you yearn for a return to civility?

Author Robert Fulghum addressed the problem of a general lack of courtesy and politeness this way: "All I really need to know about how to live and what to do and how to be I learned in kindergarten . . . Share everything. Play fair. Don't hit people . . . Say you're sorry when you hit somebody" (*All I Really Need to Know I Learned In Kindergarten*, Villard Books, New York, 1989, p. 6). The author then mentioned that the world would be a better place if everyone, including the leaders of governments, lived by these basic principles.

This sandbox wisdom happens to be in agreement with the Bible. It can be described with one word from the Book of Books. That word is *gentleness*.

Gentleness—mildness of manners or disposition—is too often lacking in our world. Gentleness—not to be confused with weakness or a lack of resolve—is a trait of character we all could use more of.

Gentleness doesn't come naturally. Gentleness is something Christians must learn. It is a trait that is godly, and as His children God expects us to become gentle, as He is.

Becoming gentle is not easy. Sometimes gentleness comes with great difficulty and through harrowing circumstances.

How Elijah learned

An example of learning gentleness the hard way is the life of Elijah. This man of God—the quintessential Old Testament prophet—boldly denounced sin. He exuded courage, seeming to fear no one. On one occasion he called fire down from heaven in a magnificent display of his (and God's) disapproval of lawlessness.

He then proceeded to lead a band of men to execute hundreds of pagan prophets (1 Kings 18:36-40). Surely at this point no one would have mentioned

Elijah and gentleness in the same breath.

Elijah was a fierce warrior in the battle against apostasy. But, hard on the heels of this impressive victory against pagan religion, God allowed another type of experience to befall Elijah and teach him something about godly character. The false prophets whom Elijah killed were devotees of wicked Queen Jezebel. Upon hearing of the prophet's zeal in slaughtering the heathen seers, the queen swore out a warrant for Elijah's arrest and execution.

When we read of this episode in Elijah's history, we see the normally resolute man of God suddenly and inexplicably terrified. He acts like a broken man. He flees for his life. He is on the run for 40 days, then finds himself at Mount Horeb (Sinai), where he seeks refuge in a cave (1 Kings 19:1-8). God asks Elijah why he fled. Elijah bitterly replies that he went there because he was "very zealous" for the truth, but his only reward was a death sentence (1 Kings 19:9, 10).

God tells His servant to watch. God then effects three powerful displays. First, a fierce wind rips boulders loose from the mountain. Second, a mighty quake shakes the land. Third, a fire suddenly flares.

At various times God had used all three of these phenomena to communicate with human beings. On this occasion, though, God uses a quite different medium. Elijah hears a "still small voice." The prophet immediately recognizes the voice and comprehends the message.

The Expositor's Bible Commentary notes of this passage: "Even God does not always operate in the realm of the spectacular!" (Vol. 4, p. 150). God apparently wanted to show Elijah His gentle side. People who serve God must retain their humility and be of a gentle spirit. There comes a time to act strongly and loudly, but other times call for a quiet and gentle approach.

Jesus' disciples learned

The disciples of Jesus Christ learned this same lesson. Like Elijah, they wanted to burn evildoers. They mistakenly thought ferocity was the ideal behavior for a servant of God. As He had with Elijah, God intervened, through Jesus Christ, to show

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Gentleness doesn't come naturally. Gentleness is something Christians must learn. It is a trait that is godly, and as His children God expects us to become gentle, as He is.

Are All Spiritual 'Shadows' Obsolete?

The apostle Paul wrote of the Sabbath and Holy Days as being “a shadow of things to come.” Did he mean to tell us that these observances are now obsolete and meaningless?

by Rod McQueen

When you go for a walk on a sunny day and you glance down at the ground, what do you see? You see a shadow. There you are in silhouette, a perfect representation of your profile is exquisitely etched onto the ground.

You cannot fool it. You cannot run away from it. Your shadow precisely represents your features, your every move. Wherever you go it is there, telling what you are like—fat or thin, hairy or bald, big ears or small. It's there for all the world to see.

But can someone watching your shadow know the real you?

Of course not. He can grasp your profile. He can even, if he observes long enough, get a feel for many of your mannerisms. If you often scratch your ear, he can see that. If you nervously fidget with your watch, someone watching your shadow can notice that also. But he can still know only a little about you.

Obviously, your shadow isn't you. Your shadow corresponds to your physical features but is not the reality. Your shadow tells a shadow watcher nothing about the inner you. It says nothing about your frame of mind, except as your profile may vaguely reflect your moods. A person watching your shadow would not know what is really going on inside your head.

Your shadow gives a hint of you, an intimation of what you may be like—but only a hint, not the fullness of your existence.

You and your shadow

What is the significance of this discussion about you and your shadow? We often hear the argument that, because some objects or acts referred to in the Old Testament are only shadows, they are of no lasting value for spiritually minded people. We are told that we are to lift ourselves above any physical, earthly representations of God's great spiritual truths into the comprehension of the truth itself. Such physical representations, some say, are voided by the greater spiritual truths they represent.

For centuries Bible students have debated the question of the role, if any, of Old Testament law in the lives of Christians. Two schools of thought are at extreme odds. One school believes Old Testament

moral law is still incumbent on a Christian as a guide to life. The other says it isn't, that we have moved from the Old Testament era of law to the New Testament era of grace and the gospel.

The first way of thinking says that, unless the New Testament rescinds an Old Testament precept, either in word or in principle, then we can consider it still binding. The second approach counters that, unless the New Testament restates an Old Testament law, also in word or principle, it is obsolete, vanishing along with the entire Old Covenant.

The two schools converge in their view that one part of Old Testament legislation is definitely not relevant as a guide for Christian practices today—that section of the law often referred to as ritual or ceremonial. Most agree that all that is ceremonial is merely a shadow of a greater reality.

However, most take for granted that *all* that can be termed “shadow” is ceremonial and hence of no value as a guide to Christian behavior. Ceremonies are considered synonymous with shadows, and therefore all are rendered obsolete by the arrival of the reality in Christ.

Some who believe this way can make a convincing case, especially to those who are not willing to prove what the Scriptures really say. With their preconceived ideas, their arguments go like this:

- Doesn't the shadow analogy make sense? If you grasp the reality, and are actively engaged in living out the reality, do you need to waste your time with the mere hint of the reality?

- Doesn't the Bible itself, in Hebrews 10:1, seem to indicate the limited value of shadows? That verse calls the sacrificial system “a shadow of the good things to come.” The sacrificial system was only a shadow of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Now that we have the reality, we no longer need to sacrifice animals.

- Likewise, we are told that the Sabbath and Holy Days are also shadows: “So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ” (Colossians 2:16-17).

- If circumcision for uncircumcised converts is no longer necessary because the Old Testament command was a shadow of circumcision of the

We often hear the argument that, because some objects or acts referred to in the Old Testament are only shadows, they are of no lasting value for spiritually minded people. But what does the Bible teach us about shadows?

heart, then does it not logically follow that you don't need to worry about a shadow of spiritual rest? You have already entered that rest in Jesus Christ. You don't need to be concerned in the slightest about some mere intimation of that spiritual rest, as the Sabbath is thought to be.

The preceding four points are precisely the implied argument of much of Christendom regarding shadows.

These points at first appear valid. If we don't need to sacrifice because sacrifices were merely a hint of the reality of Christ's



sacrifice, then shouldn't we be consistent and realize that we don't need to keep the Sabbath or Holy Days, which are hints of spiritual rest and the plan of salvation and a memorial (in the case of the Sabbath) of the creation? And, if the physical mark or sign of circumcision is negated in the New Testament, shouldn't that tell us that all physical practices are unnecessary?

Shadow laws

We can find this view of shadows in many theological books and treatises. The following statements from conservative theologian George Ladd describe this reasoning succinctly:

"The permanence of the Law is reflected further in the fact that Paul appeals to specific commands in the Law as the norm for

Christian conduct . . . It is quite clear, however, that the permanent aspect of the Law is the ethical and not the ceremonial . . . Although circumcision is a command of God and a part of the Law, Paul sets circumcision in contrast to the commandments, and in doing so separates the ethical from the ceremonial—the permanent from the temporal. Thus he can commend the *entolai theou* (commandments of God) to the Gentiles, and yet adamantly reject the ceremonial *entolai* (commandments), such as circumcision, foods, feasts, and even

Sabbath keeping (Colossians 2:16), for these are but a shadow of the reality that has come in Christ" (G.E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 510). We can find another typical example of this assumption in the New International Version Study Bible's note on Colossians 2:16-17:

"The ceremonial laws of the OT are here referred to as shadows . . . because they symbolically depicted the coming of Christ; so any insistence on the observance of such ceremonies is a failure to recognize that their fulfillment has already taken place. This element of the Colossian heresy was combined

with a rigid asceticism . . ."

If many consider the *moral law* of God a burden, the supposedly lesser aspects—any physical practices—are truly grit in the teeth, smoke in the eyes and a thorn in the side to them. Who would want to saddle himself with unnecessary trivial details like Holy Days or food taboos or Sabbath observance?

Trivializing truth?

This line of reasoning brands any suggestion that God requires us to do anything physical as akin to trivializing religion. "Look," the argument goes, "children are dying daily by the thousands from malnutrition. Jesus told us to love our neighbor, not to quibble over religious trifles like what you eat. Get out there and put food in the

mouths of the starving rather than worrying about the Sabbath and those other Old Testament observances."

This is an emotionally impacting argument, to be sure. But such reasoning overlooks a fundamental biblical principle: It is not within man to determine what is right and wrong. Man on his own cannot ascertain what is important to God and what is not (Proverbs 14:12; Jeremiah 10:23; Matthew 7:13-14).

In like manner, many believe that observance of the Sabbath and other days makes you a "legalist," or what some people might call a "boundary rider." Here is an example of that kind of thinking:

"Religious groups, perhaps even more than other kinds, tend to want to distinguish themselves from outsiders. So the religious experts of Paul's day spent a great deal of time focusing on boundaries. These practices received the lion's share of attention—not because they were so important in themselves, but because they became litmus tests for determining who was inside and outside the people of God. This was a 'boundary-oriented approach' to the spiritual life. While the religious experts focused on clarifying boundaries, Jesus focused on what lies at the center of a faithful life" (J. Ortberg, "Why Jesus' Disciples Wouldn't Wash Their Hands," *Christianity Today*, August 15, 1994).

Though the Pharisees, as well as those Paul confronted who taught one could be justified by obedience to the law, undoubtedly used aspects of God's law to justify their legalism, that doesn't mean the fault lies with the law itself. Wrong use of something doesn't make the thing wrong. This is a false argument frequently advanced against God's Sabbath and Holy Days.

Asceticism vs. Christian freedom

How should we respond to such reasoning? Probably the best place to start is with Colossians 2:16-17, because critics of Sabbath-observance use these verses as the starting point for their argument that the reality has come and the shadows have now disappeared. This interpretation of this passage is nothing new—religious writers have interpreted Colossians 2:16-17 this way at least as far back as the second century.

In his epistle to the Colossians Paul takes to task a heretical teaching. The fundamental error he addresses here is the idea that Christians need more than Jesus Christ to attain reconciliation and a perpetual relationship with God.

The false teachers in Colossae asserted that Jesus Christ is not enough. One needs also, they taught, to work through angels as intermediaries (Colossians 2:18).

In addition, they taught that the route to true spirituality requires strict asceticism and ritual. These consist of “putting off the body of flesh” (verse 11), rigorous treatment of the body (verse 23) and prohibition of the tasting or touching (verse 21) or enjoying of foods (the “in food or in drink” of verse 16 is more properly translated “in eating and in drinking”).

The error in this interpretation of this

If it were true that Christians don't have to worry about the shadow of Sabbath observance because it is only a shadow, then a logically consistent God would not require any shadow observance. But He does!

passage lies in assuming that the topic in question was whether we should worry about clean and unclean meats—or observing Holy days or the Sabbath. But this is *not* what Paul is discussing. It is asceticism vs. Christian rejoicing and feasting. The Colossian heretics were criticizing (judging) the Colossian Christians for eating and drinking during their festival celebrations. The question is decidedly not *whether* Christians should observe Holy Days or the Sabbath. It is a matter of *how* they observed these things.

Paul encourages the Colossian Christians to turn a deaf ear to such criticism and to enjoy their eating and drinking during the festive Holy Day celebrations. The conventional wisdom—that Paul is telling them to turn a deaf ear to anyone suggesting that they ought to observe the Holy Days—is unjustified because it ignores the many clear references to ascetic practices that form the context for Paul’s instructions. (For more details, request our free booklet *Sunset to Sunset—God’s Sabbath Rest.*)

Certainly verse 17 tells us that some of these things spoken of are shadows. But to read that truth as if it means that they are no longer necessary is reading into Scripture something that is not there. Quite the contrary, that the Sabbath and Holy Days are a shadow of something wonderful is a worthy reason for keeping them, just as the realization that bread and wine represent Jesus Christ’s broken body and shed blood is a wonderful reason for participating in the Passover service. Another good reason for the ceremony of baptism is that it pictures burial in a watery grave with Jesus Christ.

Why do those who espouse this erroneous view of this passage not stop to ask

why Paul did not include sacrifices and circumcision on the list of shadows in Colossians 2:16 if the whole point of these verses is to show that Christians don’t need to keep such things?

Jesus Christ’s words and example

Are shadows obsolete? Or, worse than that, are they useless? This question is of considerable significance to anyone determined to obey God.

Before we go any further, we encourage anyone who doubts the value of shadows to consider the significance of a remarkable

New Testament account. Who is our ultimate model and guide in all things? Our example is Jesus Christ, of course.

It is enlightening to realize that our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, took shadows seriously. The New Testament records two occasions on which Jesus stormed into the temple in Jerusalem and took drastic action. Even though the temple was a shadow (Hebrews 8:5), Jesus was moved to anger when He saw this shadow desecrated. You probably remember the story: He went in and overthrew the tables of the money changers, then drove them from the area.

Notice what He said: “Is it not written, My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations? But you have made it a ‘den of thieves’” (Mark 11:17). Then we have the Gospel writer’s follow-up statement: “And his disciples remembered that it was written, ‘Zeal for Your house has eaten Me up’” (John 2:17).

Shadows were certainly important to Jesus Christ. He risked His personal safety to angrily rebuke those who showed callous disregard for the spiritual significance of a physical location in which physical priests performed physical sacrifices.

Christ’s example demonstrates that we must not ignore the shadows the Bible details. We do so at our own peril. To treat them as of no concern is frightening when we consider Jesus’ own words: “Whoever therefore *breaks* one of the least of these commandments, *and teaches men so*, shall be called *least* in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever *does and teaches them*, he shall be called *great* in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:19, emphasis added throughout).

To brand attempts to observe the precepts

of the Old Testament observed by Jesus and the early Church as Judaizing or dishonoring Jesus contradicts Jesus Christ’s own words and example. By Jesus’ own words, this treads on dangerous ground indeed!

God commands shadows

One simple fact conclusively abolishes the classical antishadow argument: The New Testament reveals several shadows that it declares we *must* keep. Two of the most significant are the shadows of baptism—symbolizing entering a watery grave with Jesus Christ—and celebration of the Passover. The bread and wine partaken at Passover are merely shadows of Jesus Christ’s perfect sacrifice, yet we all know we must partake of them.

Yet these are not the only shadows commanded of Christians in the New Testament. Laying on of hands (Hebrews 6:2), anointing with oil (James 5:14), foot-washing (John 13:14) and other actions are commanded not because they are greater than the spiritual truths and principles they symbolize, but to aid in our spiritual comprehension as we do them. Throughout the Bible God commanded and still commands physical acts to help us understand spiritual lessons.

Don’t let the significance of this simple fact escape you: If it were true that Christians don’t have to worry about the shadow of Sabbath observance because it is only a shadow, then a logically consistent God would not require *any* shadow observance.

But He does!

Stop and think. If the shadows of baptism and Passover are worth keeping, who could dare say that others are worthless? The oft-quoted Colossians 2:16-17 certainly doesn’t say any such thing.

This raises the important question of the meaning of 1 Corinthians 5:7-8. In the past many have read this as a simple instruction not to despise the shadow of putting leaven out of their homes during the Days of Unleavened Bread. Some go so far as to argue that this passage means no such thing but that it is an instruction to continue to be only spiritually unleavened. What does the passage say?

Let’s look at it: “Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.”

This passage lends itself to two possible readings. The first is the simple and straightforward interpretation: Christians should observe the Days of Unleavened Bread, literally and spiritually. They should be always spiritually unleavened (“purge out the old leaven”), just as they are, during the Days of Unleavened Bread, physically unleavened (“since you truly are unleavened”).

The other meaning comes from reading it more metaphorically, something like this: As Christians, let us every day of our lives observe the spiritual meaning of the Old Testament Feast of Unleavened Bread. Let us continue to be spiritually unleavened (“purge out the old leaven”) in the same way that, at conversion, you began the process of becoming spiritually unleavened (“since you truly are unleavened”).

There are ardent advocates of either interpretation. The question is which is correct? Perhaps we cannot decide the answer by strict analysis (*exegesis*) of the verses in question. We have to stand back and consider a passage in the larger context of the book in which it appears, in the light of the Bible as a whole and the context of common sense (the science and art of *hermeneutics*).

Keep in mind that one’s own system of belief affects one’s interpretation. The standard Protestant belief system leads one to lean towards the latter explanation.

Let’s first apply common sense. If someone said to you in June, “Let’s remember July 4,” would you be likely to assume that he means you should celebrate only the *meaning* of America’s Independence Day and not the day itself? And, further, how do you celebrate a *meaning*?

Now let’s consider at what time of year Paul wrote 1 Corinthians. Since chapter 11 says so much about the Passover, it is only sensible to conclude that the book was written during the same time of year as the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread, especially when you consider such other related statements as “But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup” (verse 28).

The imminence of the Holy day season is strongly noted here. The timing is confirmed by 1 Corinthians 16:8, where Paul says that he will stay where he is until Pentecost, another of God’s festivals that occurred some seven weeks later.

With that timing as background, how should we understand Paul’s exhortation to “let us keep the feast”? (1 Corinthians 5:8). The most natural, unforced understanding is

that Paul was telling the Christians at Corinth to keep the feast both in a literal sense and even more in its spiritual intent—the meaning clearly intimated by the shadow. But he is certainly not ignoring the *literal* way.

To interpret the verse in the not-so-natural way—that all Paul’s references are merely metaphors—makes sense only if you are approaching this passage with the preconceived idea that the Holy Days are no longer necessary. Since no passages in the New Testament explicitly invalidate the Holy Days, regarding these verses purely metaphorically amounts to deliberately disregarding the plain intent of Paul’s instruction.

The example of Jesus Christ

If Jesus Christ did the things He did only because He was operating within the constraints of the Old Covenant, and if He said many of the things He said only because He was speaking to people bound by the Old Covenant, then you and I are in big trouble. We have no way to know how to determine which of His acts and statements apply to us today and which were applicable only to the audience of His day.

Those who seek to find words to live by in the Old Testament are often accused of picking and choosing the laws they feel comfortable with. But how much worse would it be to arbitrarily pick and choose from among Jesus’ words and deeds?

No, we must not play fast and loose with

Since no passages in the New Testament explicitly invalidate the Holy Days, viewing verses mentioning them as purely metaphorical amounts to disregarding the plain intent of Paul’s instruction.

the example of our Lord and Master. We must follow Him in all things. Remember Paul’s words: “Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1). And “the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked” (1 John 2:6, New American Standard Bible).

However you wish to look at it, one simple fact stands out. Jesus Christ observed the Holy Days and the Sabbath and did not eat unclean food. But His disciples offered no animal sacrifices for their sins, and He did not advise His followers to ritually wash themselves.

To ascribe the performing of the former practices simply to custom (or being under the Old Covenant) and the neglect of the latter practices to His fulfilling of the reality amounts to highly questionable—and totally unjustifiable—interpretation.

If it were good enough for our Savior and those He taught, surely it is good enough for us—isn’t it? It sounds almost too simple, but this is a truth worthy of careful consideration.

Circumcision and sacrifices

Some say that, as go circumcision and sacrifices, so must go all the other shadows. But who says so? What evidence can be found in the Bible to justify such a view?

The New Testament makes abundantly clear that Christians are under no obligation to be physically circumcised or offer animal sacrifices for their sins (although circumcision certainly is not wrong), but it makes no parallel statements about the Sabbath and Holy Days.

Physical circumcision is not necessary for Christians because circumcision served as a sign of descent from Abraham. It was a symbol of a relationship between God and Abraham’s descendants. It is not obligatory for Christians because Christians are not to be overly concerned about their descent, or lack thereof, from Abraham.

Sacrifices are not necessary because we have Jesus Christ’s sacrifice to atone for our sins. Israel of old had *only* the sacrifices, which provided only a ritualistic atonement for sin.

God did not remove these shadows for Christians because they were merely shadows. He removed them for other reasons.

God presents some shadows to us as a wonderful gift to keep us mindful of deep and crucial spiritual principles.

Just as your literal shadow doesn’t reveal all there is to know about you, spiritual shadows do not tell us everything there is to know about that which casts the shadow.

On the other hand, shadows do tell us a great deal. Rather than viewing the debate as choosing between *either* the shadow *or* the reality, the evidence of the New Testament dictates that we look at the validity and spiritual importance of *both* shadow *and* reality.

Even when the reality has arrived—and by no means have the realities of all shadows yet arrived in full—we still need the shadow. We need both it and its reality.

That is the plain teaching throughout the Scriptures. **GN**

'This Is the Love of God'

How do we show that we love God? Many believe that Jesus Christ came to bring a new way to worship God. But what does the Bible say?

by Duane Ablor

Jesus Christ, the founder of Christianity, sprang from humble beginnings, although He admitted He was born to be king (John 18:37). During the few short years of His ministry, He was known by many as a great teacher. But what did He teach?

Did He come to do away with the laws of old? Was Jesus a rebellious son? Did He bring a new set of commandments to replace those the Israelites had received at Mount Sinai? Is God's law no longer valid, useful or necessary?

"Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets," Jesus proclaimed. "I did not come to destroy but to fulfill" (Matthew 5:17). What did He mean by "fulfill"? The Greek word for "fulfill" is *pleroo* and can mean to "render full," "fill up" or "complete." Did Christ mean that God's law was made complete and therefore somehow rendered obsolete?

After all, Christ gave "a new commandment" that "you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another" (John 13:34). Did He mean for this new commandment to replace all the others and that what the whole world needs is love?

Rather than refer to other New Testament scriptures, let's examine Christ's own words in this regard. First, did Jesus Christ come to the earth for His own selfish purposes?

"For I have not spoken on My own authority; but the Father who sent Me gave Me a command, what I should say and what I should speak. And I know that His command is everlasting life. Therefore, whatever I speak, just as the Father has told Me, so I speak" (John 12:49-50). Notice that Jesus equates His Father's commandment with "everlasting life."

Jesus spoke the Father's words

Jesus said He did nothing of Himself. On the contrary, His very words were those the Father gave Him (John 8:28). "For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me" (John 6:38), and "My doctrine is not Mine, but His who sent Me" (John 7:16).

The Greek word here for "doctrine" is *didache*, which simply means something being taught. Christ was saying that He did not come to

teach His own ideas. "I can of Myself do nothing," He said. "As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is righteous, because I do not seek My own will but the will of the Father who sent Me" (John 5:30).

Jesus came to uphold His Father's teachings, not supersede them. His respect for His Father was profound. "Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him" (John 13:16). "My Father is greater than I" (John 14:28), and, "that the world may know that I love the Father, and as the Father gave Me commandment, so do I" (John 14:31).

Jesus Christ loves the Father. He preached exactly what He had received from the Father. To suggest that Christ came to replace God's law is to suggest that some sort of mistake was made in the giving of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 31:18). Not only did Christ uphold His Father's teachings; He revealed that He and the Father are in perfect unity of mind: "I and My Father are one" (John 10:30).

So what are we to learn from realizing that Christ came to do the Father's will?

Believe what Jesus taught

Many sincere people teach that all you need to do is believe on Christ. But believing *on* Christ isn't enough. We must believe *what He taught*, follow His example and live as He lived. "He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked" (1 John 2:6). "He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him—the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day" (John 12:48).

How do we demonstrate our love for Christ? We show we love Him the same way He showed love for the Father: "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love" (John 15:10).

Christ's commandments and the Father's commandments are identical; Christ perfectly reflects the Father (John 14:9; 17:22).

Christ perfectly *obeyed* His Father's commandments. Matthew quoted Him: "Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called

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least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:19).

When confronted by the religious leaders of His day, Christ corrected them by showing they were breaking the laws of God: “Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition? For God commanded, saying, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death’” (Matthew 15:3-4).

Jesus said the religious leaders were making the laws of God of “none effect” by their traditions (verse 6). If God’s commandments were of no effect, Christ would not have said this. Rather, He called the Pharisees hypocrites because they knew better.

Christ concluded this indictment of the Pharisees by quoting the prophet Isaiah: “These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (Matthew 15:8-9; Isaiah 29:13).

Clearly, Christ upheld God’s law while openly rebuking the religious leaders for not doing the same. When a young man asked Jesus what he should do to gain eternal life, Christ told him to “keep the commandments” (Matthew 19:17). Jesus then referred to several of the Ten Commandments, apparently to make sure everyone understood which commandments He was speaking of. (See also Mark 12:30.)

The greatest commandment

Later one of the Pharisees tried to publicly entrap Jesus by asking, “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?”

Jesus gave him the answer: “‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22:36-40).

Again He showed that love is the foundation of our relationship with God and each other. Is this concept a departure from the original intent of the law? Is this a new teaching of Christ?

The Greek word for “hang,” in the verse quoted above, is *kremannumi*, meaning to

“hang up” or “suspend.” Jesus meant that the Law and the Prophets are summed up, or hang on, these two precepts of godly love. In answering this question, Christ was hardly undoing God’s law. He was quoting it! (Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18).

Love is the main ingredient of a Christian life. But our love must be manifest in our actions. Just believing and thinking nice thoughts isn’t sufficient. We cannot earn salvation; it is God’s gift (Ephesians 2:8). But His commandments give us the guidelines we need to enjoy a meaningful relationship with Him and our fellowman. Christ obeyed God’s law and in so doing set an example of proper love toward all people.

The definition of sin is the breaking of

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God’s law, or lawlessness (1 John 3:4). The apostle Paul clearly showed that the law defines sin (Romans 7:7-11). After explaining this essential principle, he concluded: “Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good” (Romans 7:12).

So we *are* to obey God’s law (which, even by definition, is holy) and with the help of God’s Spirit dwelling in us turn from sin (lawlessness). This is a life-long process. By ceasing from sinning and focusing on God’s way of showing concern for others, we begin to develop and show real love.

That is precisely how we demonstrate the love of Christ in our lives. “Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, ‘I know Him,’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him” (1 John 2:3-5).

An old commandment to love each other

So what did Christ mean when He said, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another”? (John 13:34). What about the commandment was new? Was the element of love some-

thing new that Christ introduced?

Clearly not. “Brethren, I write no new commandment to you, but an old commandment which you have had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word which you heard from the beginning” (1 John 2:7). “For this is the message that you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another” (1 John 3:11).

Love has always been a crucial part of God’s plan: “He who does not love does not know God, for God is love” (1 John 4:8).

So, again, what was new about Jesus’ commandment?

Adam Clarke, in his commentary on John 13:34, gives a clue: “Our Lord answers the question, ‘*Even AS I have*

loved you.’ Now Christ *more* than fulfilled the Mosaic precept; he not only loved his neighbour *AS himself*; but he loved him *MORE* than *himself*; for he laid down his life for men. In this he calls upon the disciples to imitate him, to be ready on all occasions to lay down their lives for each other. This was, strictly, a new commandment: no system of morality ever prescribed any thing so pure and disinterested as this” (original emphasis).

Christ further explained: “This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends” (John 15:12-13).

Jesus’ personal example was clearly one of submission to God’s law. In fact, Christ *did fulfill* the law, in that He performed the supreme act of love: He gave His life for mankind.

As disciples of Jesus Christ, we must do more than just believe on Him. We need also to *follow His example*. The apostle John sums up the matter in 1 John 5:1-3: “Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves Him who begot also loves him who is begotten of Him. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments. For *this is the love of God*, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome.” **GN**

Esther: A Woman of Faith and Courage

The Bible offers Christians many examples of faith from which we can learn and be encouraged. One of the most remarkable examples is that of Queen Esther.

by Donna Butler

Has fear ever paralyzed you, made you afraid to make a critical decision because of possible or probable serious consequences?

It has been said that courage is not the absence of fear; it is the mastery of it. The Bible, however, adds an important element to the definition of courage: *trust* and *faith* in God. Moses told the ancient Israelites not to fear the other nations when they crossed over the Jordan River into the promised land, because God was with them and would not forsake them (Deuteronomy 31:6).

How can you have this kind of faith? How can you step out and confidently make decisions that will affect the course of your physical—and maybe even your spiritual—life?

From an orphan to a queen

For the answer, consider the example of a Jewish girl from ancient Persia.

In the third year of his reign, Ahasuerus, king of the Medes and Persians, searched for a new queen from among the beautiful virgins in his kingdom. She was to replace

Esther realized she could not allow fear to paralyze her into inaction; that in itself would be a decision. Instead, she left the outcome with God. It was clear she had only one real choice.

Queen Vashti. Vashti had humiliated her husband in front of many people including all his officials. She had refused to allow him to display her beauty before everyone at his special feast (Esther 1:10-22).

Esther, a young orphan, was among the women the king ordered brought to the palace for special pampering and preparation for the king's scrutiny as possible royal replacements. Her cousin, Mordecai, had reared her. Mordecai was a Jewish servant "in the king's gate" (Esther 2:19), which implied that he held a position in the king's court. Following her cousin's advice, Esther

did not reveal her ethnic identity. After the king chose her as queen, she maintained her contact with her cousin (Esther 2).

Plot to wipe out a race

Sometime later Ahasuerus appointed Haman, a man prominent in the kingdom, to a special office over his princes. Ahasuerus commanded that each servant should bow down to Haman, paying him homage. Mordecai refused.

Haman was enraged by Mordecai's actions. But he wasn't satisfied just to seek revenge on one man; he devised a scheme to destroy all the Jews in the kingdom. He approached the king and informed him that the Jews did not keep the king's laws. He convinced Ahasuerus to issue a decree saying 10,000 talents of silver would go to anyone who would destroy the Jews (Esther 3).

In ancient Persia, when the king made a decree and sealed it with his signet ring, it was not to be revoked or amended. Ahasuerus's decree went out, resulting in great mourning and fasting among the Jews throughout the land. Clothed in sackcloth

and ashes of mourning, Mordecai sat in the square near the king's gate. When Esther learned of Mordecai's circumstance, she told her maids to take garments to clothe him and to take away his sackcloth. But Mordecai would not accept them.

Esther then sent Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs who attended her, to find out what was wrong with Mordecai. Mordecai told him all that had happened and gave him a copy of the written decree to show to Esther. He also told him to tell her to go to the king and plead for her people.

Esther had not seen the king for 30 days.

The king enforced a law that anyone who came into the inner court to approach him whom he had not specifically called was to die. However, the king could make an exception by holding out his golden scepter, thereby sparing the person. So Esther sent the eunuch back to Mordecai with the message that she could not enter the court to see the king.

Mordecai answered that, if she did nothing, she risked death along with all her countrymen in the kingdom. He also asked a piercing question: What if God had elevated Esther to her position as queen for the specific purpose of helping save her people at this critical time? (Esther 4:13-14).

Esther's dilemma

What a decision for such a young woman! Death seemed certain regardless of what she decided. Vashti had been only banished from her position as queen. Esther might actually be killed!

She had to answer Mordecai. What would she do? She must have prayed and agonized over her decision. Tension and anxiety must have consumed her. She was sickened with fear for herself and her people.

She must have asked herself a hundred times would God really let her die if she refused to help the Jews? She was so young. Surely God did not want her to die. On the other hand, could she stand silently by and watch heartless Haman annihilate her people? Why couldn't her dilemma just go away like a bad dream?

In the midst of her turmoil, Esther realized she could not allow fear to paralyze her into inaction; that in itself would be a decision. Instead, she left the outcome with God. It was clear she had only one real choice.

Even in giving Mordecai her answer, Esther knew she did not have the courage within herself to face Ahasuerus. But she

did know where to go for the courage she lacked: to God in fasting and prayer. Placing her life in God's hands, she let Him decide the outcome for her and her people.

She sent word to Mordecai requesting that he ask their fellow Jews to fast for her for three days and nights. She and her maids would do likewise. Then she promised to go before the king, knowing full well she was risking her life (Esther 4:16).

You can read the remainder of the book of Esther to see what happened. The king did extend his golden scepter, and he spared Esther's life. After several special banquets for the king and Haman, Esther finally revealed Haman's plot and made known her request for her people. The

Sometimes fear is our normal human reaction when we are faced with a seemingly impossible decision. But we must not allow fear to paralyze us into taking no action at all.

king ordered Haman hanged on the very gallows he had prepared for Mordecai's execution.

The king issued a new decree: The Jews were free to defend themselves and destroy anyone who would assault them. He promoted Mordecai, and the Jews were saved. To this day, many Jews observe the Feast of Purim in honor of this event.

What can we learn?

Sometimes fear is our normal human reaction when we are faced with a seemingly impossible decision. Acknowledging our lack of courage is the first step to overcoming it. But we must not allow fear to paralyze us into taking no action at all.

You must realize that you need help and that you cannot go it alone. Recognize that God is all powerful, that He has promised never to leave you or forsake you (Hebrews 13:5). Go to Him in prayer and fasting to seek His will in making the right decision. Then confidently make your decision, with the courage and conviction that God is on your side.

Perhaps a fitting conclusion to this story of godly courage can come from the words on a memorial in Westminster Abbey. Inscribed on the monument to Lord Lawrence are these words: "He feared man so little because he feared God so much." *GN*

Gentleness

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them they were wrong.

Friends of James and John called those two "the Sons of Thunder" (Mark 3:17). The Gospel of Luke shows this was an appropriate nickname for the pair. Jesus and His disciples were traveling to Jerusalem, and on the way they sought lodging in a Samaritan city. Historians tell us of long-standing enmity between the Samaritans and the Jewish people. Samaritans refused to allow Jews to enter their city (Luke 9:51-53).

Because they feel snubbed, James and John say they would like to duplicate Elijah's miracle of destruction by fire. Jesus is put off by their attitudes, and His unequivocal response comes through in the statement that "He turned and rebuked them."

Jesus lets James and John know that their attitude is not right because the "Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives but to save them" (Luke 9:54-56).

In the biblical accounts of Elijah and the Sons of Thunder, Christians can learn an important lesson—that we are to be predominantly gentle people, just as our Savior, Jesus Christ, was gentle. In Jesus' many statements about Himself, one of the most memorable is found in Matthew 11:28-30. Here He plainly states that He is "gentle and lowly in heart."

In His message to His disciples in Matthew 5, commonly called the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus honors pacific people: "Blessed are the poor in spirit . . . Blessed are the meek . . . Blessed are the merciful . . . Blessed are the pure in heart . . . Blessed are the peacemakers" (Matthew 5:1-9).

We see the quality of gentleness woven through the fabric of the message. This trait stands in the Bible as the proper temperament for a servant of God. People who breathe "threats and murder" miss the point of their calling, as was the case with the unconverted Saul of Tarsus (Acts 9:1). Heavy-handed tactics are like a hefty ax that lacks a keen edge. They are more suited to bruise than to prune.

Ours is not a gentle world

When we think of gentleness, we note a marked contrast between that ideal and the standards of our era. Ours is an age that is too often marked by hostility and malice, rather than compassion and reasonableness. It is steeped in the doctrine of cutthroat competition.

Fair, ethical and friendly competition can produce a superior product for the money, but, when abused, competition can exact a great price in human relationships. Vicious and unfair competition can reduce man from a creature of potential gentleness to a product of social Darwinism. The strongest, most competitive survive. Conglomerates and cartels consume small, family-owned businesses. The result can be an inhospitable community, to say the least.

Even our speech too often barbs and bristles, adversely affecting our relationships. The tongue can divide and destroy. Mortimer B. Zuckerman, editor of *U.S. News & World Report*, wrote: "In these fraught times, our rhetoric must be toned down, our words more carefully weighed . . ." (*U.S. News & World Report*, June 12, 1995, p. 94).

Destructive, harsh tactics do not reflect the values of the Bible. The prophet Isaiah recorded: "The Lord GOD has given Me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him who is weary" (Isaiah 50:4). This scripture is in reality a prophecy of Jesus Christ, our example. Society should know a Christian for his gentleness.

Paul wrote, "Let your gentleness be known to all men" (Philippians 4:5). This apostle, formerly the violent and persecuting Saul of Tarsus, had learned the gentleness of God—just as had Elijah. The Greek word for *gentleness* is *epieikes*; it is sometimes translated "graciousness," "courtesy" or "moderation." According to William Barclay, no English word completely captures the meaning of *epieikes*. Matthew Arnold, a 19th-century English poet, defined *epieikes* as "sweet reasonableness" (*The Daily Study Bible Series*, Vol. 14, p. 96). If *epieikes* is an evasive concept to translate, it is also an elusive trait to internalize.

Epieikes is manifest in Jesus Christ, as we have seen.

The book of Isaiah shows us that Jesus Christ will deal with an afflicted humanity with the utmost tenderness. "He will feed His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom, and gently lead those who are with young" (Isaiah 40:11).

Ours is an age in which the followers of Jesus should shine forth as lights in the world by emulating the gentleness of Christ in word and deed.

Those who would follow Jesus Christ must by all means learn what it means to be meek and lowly in heart. *GN*

Faith and the Balance Beam

*How can we learn to exercise faith in our everyday lives?
I learned an important lesson from my granddaughter!*

by Andrea West

My husband and I took a trip recently to visit our children and grandchildren. We left our home in Missouri, where the wind still blew cold, and ended our journey in a warm and balmy part of Texas.

We have made it a custom to take our little granddaughters—Ashley and Chantelle—to play in a park whenever we can. Since the weather was so nice, we took the girls to a nearby playground. They ran from one diversion to another until we discovered a fitness area with a balance beam that was only about two feet off the ground.

Ashley, who was 5 years old at the time, wanted to hold onto my arm and walk the beam. I explained to her that she needed her arms free so she could stretch them out for balance.

I promised I would grasp the back of her shirt and catch her should she fall. But Ashley was afraid anyway and would not attempt the balance beam.

Stepping out in faith

The next day we revisited the playground. Again, Ashley wanted to walk the beam. I described for her how she could place one foot in front of the other while holding her hands out to steady herself. I held the back of her shirt and promised I would catch her if she began to fall. This time she trusted me and walked the length of the beam.

After a few days, when we returned home to Mis-

God tells us that He will never leave us. Since He has made this solemn promise, we can trust Him as we put one foot in front of the other on whatever balance beam we are walking at the moment.

souri, something happened that brought back my experience with Ashley and the balance beam.

I was wrestling with discouragement and loneliness—those emotions that get tangled up in our minds and keep us from moving forward. In the midst of my struggle, as I asked God to deliver me from the frame of mind holding me captive, the incident of the balance beam came back to mind. I found I had learned from it a lesson or two that helped me get past my problems.

I thought about Ashley and understood that she had

to have faith in me to reach her goal. The balance beam unsettled her 5-year-old mind. But, by allowing herself to rest her hand on my arm, she could depend on herself to hold on if she started to fall. As she relied on me to catch her, I held onto her so gently that she couldn't even feel my touch.

It might have seemed to her that she was alone, with nothing to support her, except she trusted her grandmother. Our relationship enabled her to turn loose and walk. She knew I had never harmed her. She knew I would do what I promised. She knew I loved her and wanted only good for her.

As Christians, we have this same connection with God. He is our Father. He loves us and promises to supply our every need.

One foot at a time

Ashley had to trust me, and then she had to do her part. She had to put one foot in front of the other. She had to hold her little arms out for balance and then take the steps that permitted her to grow in ability and confidence. She had the courage to do this because I was there, and she believed that I was worthy of her trust.

God is infinitely more trustworthy than I. Yet He wants all of us to learn the same lesson about Him that Ashley has learned about me.

God tells us that He will never leave us. Since He has made this solemn promise, we can trust Him as we put one foot in front of the other on whatever balance beam we are walking at the moment.

We must not forget that at times He holds on so lightly that we may not even realize He is helping us. This is where our relationship with Him comes in.

If you have enjoyed an enduring relationship with God, you can call to remembrance His help in the past and trust Him to continue it. If you are just now developing dependence on your Father, go forward. He will prove faithful.

God wants us to listen to Him when He explains to us in the Bible how to put one foot in front of the other. He wants us to hold our arms out to Him in prayer for balance. Then He wants us to get on with our life, ever knowing that He is faithful. As we progress with our Father's help, we will come to recognize that, even though He may at times hold onto us lightly, He will never let go. *GN*