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THE

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REAL TRUTH

A MAGAZINE RESTORING PLAIN UNDERSTANDING

ISRAEL vs. HAMAS 4,000 Years in the Making





People make their way across a flooded street in Flensburg, northern Germany as Storm Babet caused havoc (Oct. 20, 2023).

AXEL HEIMKEN/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

The Unfair Toll of Extreme Weather

In Guatemala, Libya, Tanzania—and even the U.S.—extreme weather impacts the poor and vulnerable the most.

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Front Cover: Members of Hamas’ armed wing, the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, hold a Palestinian flag as they destroy an Israeli forces tank in Gaza City, Gaza (Oct. 7, 2023).

HANI ALSHAER/ANADOLU AGENCY VIA GETTY IMAGES

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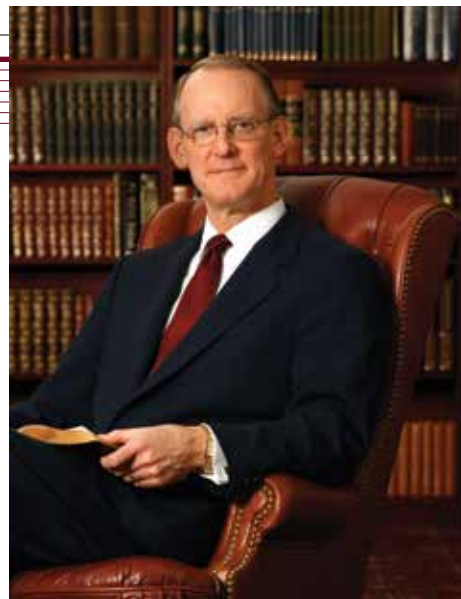
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PERSONAL FROM

David C. Fack



Healing—the Bible Truth

DOES GOD still heal today? Did this kind of miraculous intervention end with Christ and the apostles? Is God now working through medical science? Should Christians ever seek doctors? If so, when—under what circumstances? What about public “faith healers”? I have prayed over many who were sick and have seen powerful miracles of instant healing on numerous occasions. Others were not healed. Why?

Why must people be sick? Why do so many move from illness to illness and doctor to doctor seeking remedies, cures and relief from a host of ailments, often spanning a lifetime? Why should so many have to spend much of their lives suffering—battling every conceivable condition from the common cold to life-threatening strokes or cancer?

Consider the average doctor’s waiting room. It is filled with people seeking treatment. They have no idea why they are sick—or *what* they should do about it. As a result, work loss is increasing, hospitals and clinics are full, medical and healthcare costs are soaring—with a corresponding rise in cases of physician fraud and malpractice—and there is a constant need for more doctors and equipment to diagnose and treat the skyrocketing number of patients. Suffering and confusion abound! And many die long before the end of a full lifetime.

Illness and disease have stalked mankind for millennia. Plagues and sickness have been as inseparable

from the history of civilization as the weather or people themselves. Sadly, today, disease and crippling conditions are a fact of life for large segments of humanity.

Medical science once believed it could control and conquer disease. It has failed. The reality is that new diseases are continually emerging and older ones are rapidly mutating into antibiotic-resistant forms. Therefore, the medical world is losing its main weapon in the war against disease.

Hardly a week passes without reports of new disease outbreaks somewhere on Earth. Civilization seems to be taking two steps back for every one forward. This Personal will look at the most important *plain truth* answers from God’s Word about healing.

God’s Purpose

Is the state of health in today’s world what God intended? No! Jesus said, “I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly” (John 10:10). This verse is hardly compatible with a lifetime of suffering every possible illness and malady known to man. The apostle John explained God’s intent: “I wish above all things that you may prosper and be in health” (III John 2).

Yes, God’s purpose is that all human beings enjoy robust health. His intention has always been that they enjoy a life of radiant, abundant living. Yet this has

never been the case for the majority of mankind. This is because humanity is ignorant of what God says about healing. While people have many *opinions* about healing, we must look to God and His Word—the Bible—to see what He says about this subject!

All four gospel accounts record that Jesus performed many miracles during His ministry. Some of the most dramatic were healings. He made the lame walk, gave sight to the blind, healed lepers and others with palsy and “healed all that were sick” (Matt. 8:16). He also healed many minds by casting out demons from those possessed. He even resurrected the dead.

Not only did Jesus heal large numbers of people, He commissioned His disciples to do the same. We will learn that His ministers, when asked, still anoint the sick today.

Throughout my ministry, I have seen every kind of sickness and disease. Having prayed over one or more people weekly for decades, I have probably performed thousands of anointings. Sometimes people were healed—sometimes not. On certain occasions, I have personally been healed—and on others I have not.

I have also *counseled* many hundreds who faced serious illness—some life-threatening. This brought questions. People generally asked the same basic questions: Does the God of the Bible still heal today? Or has He now commissioned medical science to be His instrument—to take His place? Has the time of miracles and healings passed? What are the “gifts of healing” described in I Corinthians 12:9 and 28? Are today’s faith healers, and their healing revivals, manifestations of these gifts? Is it a sin to go to a doctor or a hospital? If God still heals today, what part does faith play—and what is real faith?

Genesis contains God’s description of the creation of man. The account reveals what God thought of His work after it was finished. Notice: “God made the beast of the earth after his kind, and cattle after their kind, and every thing that creeps upon the earth after his kind: and God saw that it was good,”

(1:25) and, “God created man in His own image...male and female created He them” (vs. 27). Next comes an important statement: “God blessed them, and...said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the Earth” (vs. 28). This verse addresses—though indirectly—the subject of healing for the first time. Let me explain.

If God had instilled viruses, bacteria, parasites and inherited traits that led to diseases and degenerative conditions at Adam and Eve’s creation, it could hardly be described as blessing them. This would be more like cursing them!

Now another key point about the original condition of the first human beings. Genesis concludes, “God saw everything that He had made, and, behold, it was very good” (vs. 31). Think about this. Does this verse leave room for the hidden presence, within Adam and Eve, of every disease, illness, sickness and ailment known to man? Of course not! Disease is not “very good”—it is very bad!

Since God blessed this couple and said that their creation was very good, disease could not yet have been present. It must have entered the picture later.

It was never God’s purpose that He would have to heal human beings of illness and disease. The Bible actually reveals His Plan for all people is that every form of sickness will disappear forever. But, since man has brought this condition upon himself, God had to address it and explain His role as Healer.

The Bible Teaching

If I wanted to learn to fly an airplane, I would ask a pilot. If I wanted to build a house, I would speak to a contractor. If I wanted to understand plumbing, I would consult a plumber. The same is true of healing. If one wants to learn about *healing*, he should not ask a doctor, nurse, paramedic or any other “medical expert.” They cannot heal anyone—and most will readily admit this! They will usually admit they do not know what the Bible says about it.

God is the One who heals. If you want to learn about healing, ask Him—the One who knows about it.

He says in Hosea, “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge: because you have rejected knowledge, I will also reject you” (4:6). All essential knowledge of God is available to any who seek it. But to get the full picture, the scriptures must be put together carefully and completely. God says He reveals His teaching to those mature enough to be instructed. Notice: “Whom shall He teach knowledge? And whom shall He make to understand doctrine? Them that are weaned from the milk...For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little” (Isa. 28:9-10). Thus, all verses on healing are not in one place.

The Bible reveals God’s will—His understanding and teaching—on every spiritual matter. It has much to say about healing. Examining many verses strips away the mystery.

Two vital New Testament scriptures set the stage for all that we will study. Mark 5 records the case of “a certain woman, which had an issue of blood twelve years, and had suffered many things of many physicians, and had spent all that she had, and was nothing bettered, but rather grew worse” (vs. 25-26). Jesus healed her and made this all-important statement: “Daughter, your faith has made you whole” (vs. 34).

Doctors did not—and could not—heal her. But Jesus could, and faith was the key.

Matthew 9 shows how healing is always directly tied to faith: “Two blind men followed Him [Jesus], crying, and saying, You son of David, have mercy on us. And...the blind men came to Him: and Jesus said unto them, Believe you that I am able to do this? They said unto Him, Yes, Lord.” His answer? “Then touched He their eyes, saying, *According to your faith be it unto you*” (vs. 27-29).

Jesus asked, “When the Son of man comes, shall He find faith on the earth?” (Luke 18:8). This is presented as an open question. He understood most people would not have faith at the end of the age—just before the establishing of

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The Missing Ingredient for Good Health

HOLY BIBLE

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ISRAEL VS. HAMAS

4,000 Years in the Making

The Bible reveals the driving force behind today's conflict in Gaza and what its ultimate outcome will be.

BY SAMUEL C. BAXTER



THE DAWN attack on October 7 by Hamas militants took Israel by surprise. Yet continued violence between the Jewish nation and Palestinian extremists should be anything but surprising.

Over the decades, Israel and the Palestinians have been involved in regular wars, barrages of rocket fire, vigilante killings and political clashes. The writing was on the wall in 2022, which the United Nations Security Council called “the deadliest year in the Israel-Palestine conflict.”

Then came 2023. The Hamas surprise attack killed at least 1,405 Israelis and injured around 5,431. As of this writing, Israel’s counteroffensive bombings have killed at least 6,546 Gazans and injured more than 17,000.

Yet the start of this violent conflict goes back much further than when modern Israel became a state in 1948. It goes back past the Crusades when Jerusalem passed hands from Muslims to Christian Crusaders and back again. It goes back thousands of years further, past when Muhammad founded the Islamic religion, beyond the life of Jesus Christ—all the way back to Abraham, circa 2000 BC.

The connection to Abraham is not lost on world leaders. These ties influenced the name for 2020’s “Abraham Accords,” the U.S.-brokered process to normalize relations between Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco and other Arab nations.

The Accords declaration states: “We encourage efforts to promote interfaith and intercultural dialogue to advance a culture of peace among the three Abrahamic religions and all humanity.

“We believe that the best way to address challenges is through cooperation and dialogue and that developing friendly relations among States advances the interests of lasting peace in the Middle East and around the world.”



Left, Israel's Iron Dome air defense system intercepts rockets launched from Gaza (Oct. 11, 2023). Top right, smoke and debris ascends over the northern Gaza Strip following an Israeli strike (Oct. 23, 2023). Bottom right, a woman holding a girl reacts after airstrikes hit the Ridwan neighborhood of Gaza City, Gaza (Oct. 23, 2023).

BASHAR TALEB/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES; JACK GUEZ/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES; ALI JADALLAH/ANADOLU VIA GETTY IMAGES

In Gaza, 99 percent of the population adheres to Islam. The nation of Israel is majority Jewish. Both religions have ties to Abraham of the Old Testament. Christianity is the third religion with a link to the patriarch.

While world leaders hope the Abraham connection will bring them together, the Bible reveals something different. It makes clear what has fueled the historical and violent rivalry between Muslims and Jews—and what continues to drive world events today.

Family Rivalry

Nations are families grown large. The personalities and character traits of those families then impacted their descendants throughout the centuries. While many skip over the genealogies of the Bible, they often contain crucial information to understand both ancient and modern nations.

The same is true for Arabs and Jews today.

Abraham's first two sons were Ishmael and Isaac—the respective



WHAT IS HAMAS?

The group was founded in 1987 by Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, a Palestinian refugee living in Gaza, during the first intifada, or uprising, which was marked by widespread protests against Israel's occupation.

The name Hamas comes from the Arabic acronym for the Islamic Resistance Movement, and a recognition of the group's roots and early ties to one of the Sunni world's most prominent groups, the Muslim Brotherhood, founded in Egypt in the 1920s.

The group has vowed to annihilate Israel and has been responsible for many suicide bombings and other deadly attacks on civilians and Israeli soldiers.

The U.S. State Department designated Hamas a terrorist group in 1997. The European Union and other Western countries also consider it a terrorist organization.

Hamas won 2006 parliamentary elections and in 2007 violently seized control of the Gaza Strip from the internationally recognized Palestinian Authority. The Palestinian Authority, dominated by the rival Fatah movement, administers semi-autonomous areas of the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

Israel responded to the Hamas takeover with a blockade on Gaza, restricting movement of people and goods in and out of the territory in a step it says is needed to keep the group from developing weapons. The blockade has ravaged Gaza's economy, and Palestinians accuse Israel of collective punishment.

Over the years, Hamas received backing from Arab countries, such as Qatar and Turkey. Recently, it has moved closer to Iran and its allies.

Hamas founder and spiritual leader Yassin—a paralyzed man who used a wheelchair—spent years in Israeli prisons and oversaw the establishment of Hamas' military wing, which carried out its first suicide attack in 1993.

Israeli forces have targeted Hamas leaders throughout the years, killing Yassin in 2004. Khaled Mashaal, an exiled Hamas member who survived an earlier Israeli assassination attempt, became the group's leader soon after.

Yehia Sinwar, in Gaza, and Ismail Haniyeh, who lives in exile, are Hamas' current leaders. They realigned the group's leadership with Iran and its allies, including Lebanon's Hezbollah. Since then, many of the group's leaders relocated to Beirut.

Hamas has carried out suicide bombings and over the years fired tens of thousands of increasingly powerful rockets from Gaza into Israel. It also established a network of tunnels running from Gaza to Egypt to smuggle in weapons, as well as attack tunnels burrowing into Israel.

The group has always espoused violence as a means to liberate occupied Palestinian territories and has called for the annihilation of Israel.

It is important to note that the aims of Hamas do not represent those of all Palestinians. Yet, while they vary on the tactics to achieve it, one thing is plain: Palestinians want statehood. □

fathers of Arabs and Israelites. The two boys had different mothers, one was Hagar and the other Sarah.

Sarah, Abraham's wife, was infertile and unable to produce an heir. So she decided to offer her handmaid Hagar to her husband. The servant quickly became pregnant.

While Sarah thought this arrangement would make her happy, it quickly did the opposite. Genesis 16:4 shows Sarah "despised" Hagar and she drove the pregnant woman away.

God delivered a message to Hagar in the wilderness, which begins to explain the demographic troubles in the Holy Land today.

The angel of the LORD told her, "I will multiply your seed exceedingly, that it shall not be numbered for multitude" (Gen. 16:10). He also promised: "Behold, you are with child, and shall bear a son, and shall call his name Ishmael; because the LORD has heard your affliction" (vs. 11).

Ishmael's descendants truly have become a multitude. The Arab world—stretching from Morocco in the west to Iraq and Oman in the east—has a population of 475 million.

Verse 12 adds to that promise: "And he [Ishmael] will be a wild man; his hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him; and he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren."

His hand against every man and every man's hand against him sums up much of Arab history. It certainly describes the situation in Israel today!

Other translations help make clear what "shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren" means...

Christian Standard Bible: "He will settle *near* all his relatives."

Revised Standard Version: "He shall dwell *over against* all his kinsmen."

New Living Translation: "Yes, he will live in *open hostility* against all his relatives."

Legacy Standard Bible: "And he will *dwell in the face of* all his brothers."

Look at any map of modern Israel. Arabs certainly dwell "near," "over against," and "in the face of" the Jewish peoples. Not to mention the Arab



Top, Israeli army soldiers patrol an undisclosed area in northern Israel bordering Lebanon amid the ongoing battles between Israel and Hamas (Oct. 15, 2023). Bottom, an injured woman cries near a lifeless body after airstrikes hit the Ridwan neighborhood of Gaza City, Gaza (Oct. 23, 2023).

ARIS MESSINIS/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES; ALI JADALLAH/ANADOLU VIA GETTY IMAGES

nations of Syria, Jordan and Egypt, all of which surround Israel.

Ishmael's descendants also dwell in all the other nations that are descended from Isaac and his son Israel. There are about 6 million in France, 3.7 million in the U.S., and 500,000 apiece in the United Kingdom, Netherlands and Australia.

Make no mistake: This mixing among brethren certainly does bring times of "open hostility" and times where every man's hand is against one another—going both ways!

Ishmael's 12 sons (Gen. 25:16) went on to form major Arab nations, not insignificant nomadic tribes as some believe. These peoples intermarried primarily with the Egyptians and were located southeast of Canaan, in the region of Arabia.

Isaac's Influence

The descendants of the second of Abraham's sons, Isaac, also remain major players in world affairs. Although Ishmael was the firstborn, Isaac was the one selected to receive the birthright blessings from his father.

God further blessed Abraham when he was willing to sacrifice Isaac—

although He famously intervened. In Genesis 22, God said, "By Myself have I sworn, says the LORD, for because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son: that in blessing I will bless you, and in multiplying I will multiply your seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and your seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; and in your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because you have obeyed My voice" (vs. 16-18).

Isaac's wife Rebekah had twins: Esau was the eldest, and Jacob the younger. However, Esau lost his birthright to Jacob.

Jacob was renamed Israel, whose 12 sons gave rise to nations in Western Europe, the UK and its former colonies, and the U.S. While certainly not perfect, they have poured out monetary blessings across the globe.

One of Israel's sons was Judah, of whom many descendants live in Israel today.

Esau's sons also add to the Arab-Israeli conflict. He married Mahalath, the daughter of Ishmael (28:9). The house of Esau, also known as the Edomites and Amalekites, gave rise millennia later to

the Ottoman Turks, as well as the Seljuk Turks, who conquered and held most of Asia Minor, and the Caucasian Osmanli Turks, who controlled the Holy Land from AD 1070 until they surrendered it to the British in 1917.

Both Ishmael and Esau remained bitter for not getting the birthright blessing. Their jealousy continues to impact world affairs today.

What Does God Want?

While God promised to pour out blessings upon the nations through Isaac's descendants, He also points out character flaws in them. In Exodus 33, God calls them "stiffnecked" three times and echoes this throughout the Old Testament.

Further, Isaiah 1 describes the state of Judah and Jerusalem today (vs. 1). This is what God sees in modern Israel: "The ox knows his owner, and the ass his master's crib: but Israel does not know, My people do not consider. Ah sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers, children that are corrupters: they have forsaken the LORD, they have provoked the Holy One of Israel unto anger, they are gone away backward" (vs. 3-4).

God says that all of Israel's descendants—Judah in particular—do not know Him and are weighed down by sin. Look at the conduct of the modern peoples descended from Ishmael and Isaac. *Both* are laden with wickedness and violence. Yet He does not want it to remain this way!

Notice in Isaiah 40 what God will soon say to Judah: "Comfort you, comfort you My people, says your God. Speak you comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that *her warfare is accomplished*" (vs. 1-2). May that time come soon!

What about the Arabs?

Notice Genesis 17:18: "Abraham said unto God, O that Ishmael might live before You!" Clearly, Abraham yearned for Ishmael and his descendants to worship and follow the true God.



People look at posters showing the pictures of Israeli hostages held by Palestinian militants since the October 7 attack, near Azrieli Mall in Tel Aviv (Oct. 18, 2023).

AHMAD GHARABLI/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES



Top, smoke ascends over the northern Gaza Strip amid ongoing battles between Israel and Hamas (Oct. 23, 2023). Bottom left, an Israeli army M109 155mm self-propelled howitzer fires rounds near the border with Gaza in southern Israel (Oct. 11, 2023). Bottom right, a protester holds two Palestinian flags crossed together during a 'flag march' demonstration along the border with Israel east of Gaza city in response to the annual Israeli flag march marking Jerusalem Day (May 18, 2023).

JACK GUEZ/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES; MOHAMMED ABED/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

The patriarch loved all his sons and wanted them and their descendants to succeed. God feels the same. In fact, God feels this way about *all* His children: “The Lord is not slack concerning His promise...but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (II Pet. 3:9).

Despite the grim picture in today’s news, the future is bright for those on both sides of the conflict. Everyone involved will receive a full opportunity for salvation. The apostle Paul wrote, “I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believes; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek [meaning gentile—non-Israelites]” (Rom. 1:16).

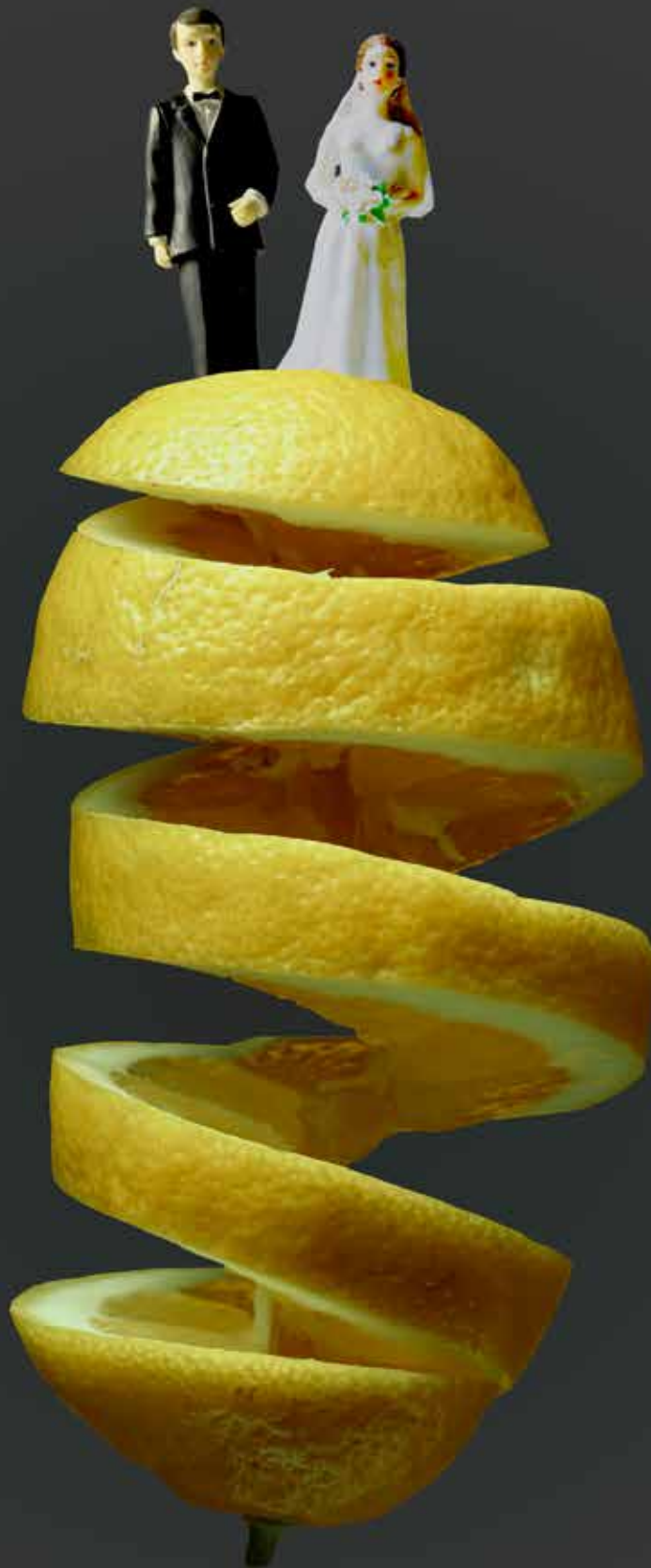
Think of the modern conflict in Israel. Jerusalem is a major sticking point—with both Muslims and Jews laying claim to it. That bitter feud will soon be a thing of the past.

Psalm 87 describes what God wants for the city: “On the holy mountain stands the city founded by the LORD. He loves the city of Jerusalem more than any other city in Israel. O city of God, what glorious things are said of you! I will count Egypt and Babylon among those who know Me—also PHILISTIA and Tyre, and even distant Ethiopia” (vs. 1-4, New Living Translation).

“Philistia” is an ancient term for Palestine. Modern Israelites and Ishmaelites will all know and obey the God of Abraham.

The end of verse 4 continues: “They have all become citizens of Jerusalem! Regarding Jerusalem it will be said, ‘Everyone enjoys the rights of citizenship there.’ And the Most High will personally bless this city. When the LORD registers the nations, He will say, ‘They have all become citizens of Jerusalem’” (87:1-6, NLT).

God uses the Bible to help us understand what is driving the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. He also shows what will soon come to pass when He establishes the Kingdom of God on Earth. To learn more about the wonderful conditions of peace and prosperity during this soon-coming time, read *Tomorrow’s Wonderful World – An Inside View!* at rcg.org/tww. □



Why Young Americans Are SOURING on Marriage

To understand the future of this institution, we must look at where marriage came from: God's Word.

BY ANDREW J. HOLCOMBE

TIMES ARE changing. A man and a woman promising to spend their lives together had been a cornerstone for societies worldwide. But more people have now come to see marriage as outdated and even limiting their freedom.

Axios recently featured observations from Andrew Cherlin, a sociologist at Johns Hopkins. He pointed out, "It used to be a basic institution that everyone had to buy into in early adulthood... You got married, then you moved in together, and then you got a job." He emphasized how this order has shifted, saying, "Marriage is now becoming the last step into adulthood." The article added, "And it is an optional step."

Additional data supports this change. Before, people got married and then focused on education or careers. Now, it is the opposite. The American National Family Life Survey highlighted that in 2021, men on average married at 30.4 years and women at 28.6 years. Compare this to 1972:

men married at 23.3 years and women at 20.9 years.

Clearly, society's priorities are shifting. Marriage still exists, but it is not the milestone it once was. Why is this happening?

Shifting Priorities

If social media feeds and friend circles are to be believed, young and middle-aged adults are enjoying a carefree, event-filled life of singlehood. From posts highlighting the joys of filling their lives with plants and cats instead of spouses to websites selling solo vacations, more people are putting marriage off as a threshold into adulthood.

Clever Real Estate recently conducted a study on the state of marriage, and the results indicate that a significant portion of Americans are souring on marriage: 1 in 4 Americans (25 percent) think marriage is an outdated concept.

One major generational shift relates to not only why people get married but also why they stay single. In the U.S., priorities have shifted. Younger gen-

erations prioritize mental health (49 percent), physical health (44 percent), personal growth (31 percent) and even remaining debt-free (25 percent) over marriage.

"Single influencers" are now a staple on TikTok, Instagram and other social media outlets, detailing their lives without a spouse. One such individual, who coined the phrase "relationship minimalism," said: "For where I am right now, a relationship is not my priority. I have limited time and energy, and I can only allocate so much of it each day. I am trying to get rid of everything that doesn't give me true satisfaction."

Many young people are also putting education or careers ahead of marriage. According to Pew Research: "Today's young adults are much better educated than their grandparents, as the share of young adults with a bachelor's degree or higher has steadily climbed since 1968. Among Millennials, around four-in-ten (39%) of those ages 25 to 37 have a bachelor's

degree or higher, compared with just 15% of the Silent Generation, roughly a quarter of Baby Boomers and about three-in-ten Gen Xers (29%) when they were the same age.”

While getting a degree or having a good job is perfectly acceptable, education can take a lot more time and effort than in previous years. Many of today’s jobs require higher education, forcing students down long, arduous paths of education, with some still going to college into their 30s. Once a person has chosen that path, it becomes very hard to break away to get married and start a family.

But is it any wonder why people are becoming perpetual students in today’s economy? If education provides the best path toward earning a proper living and paying the bills, are the younger generations really to blame for not seeking marriage? These financial factors have made it very difficult for Millennials and Gen Zers to “leave the nest.” Not being able to find a job—or one that pays enough—has many putting off marriage by neces-

sity. Rising costs of rent, groceries, gas, car payments, insurance, taxes and so much more have left many feeling they are unable to afford going out on their own.

Divorce’s Devastating Impact

Aside from a shift in priorities, younger generations have grown more cautious and skeptical of marriage in general. The Clever Real Estate study helps reveal why by showing how different generational groups view matrimony.

Baby boomers are 397 percent more likely say nothing is more important than marriage, when compared to their Gen Z counterparts. Despite this, the older generation has a divorce rate of nearly 35 percent.

The most common reasons cited for ending a marriage are infidelity (37 percent), too many arguments (32 percent), falling out of love (27 percent), and abuse (25 percent).

Take infidelity, the cause of over one-third of all divorces. Research produced by the University of Utah

shows that “between 20 and 25 percent of married men cheat and between 10 and 15 percent of married women cheat.”

While these statistics are high across the board, how do they break out generationally? The Institute of Family Studies Research showed in 2018 that Baby Boomers top the list among other generations for infidelity. Those born between 1946 and 1964 have higher infidelity rates and thus higher divorce rates.

Younger generations see all of this and do not want to fall into the same painful outcomes. Seeing so much divorce—over one-in-three couples their parents’ or grandparents’ age—leads them to become hesitant or skeptical of marriage and either delay it or forego it altogether.

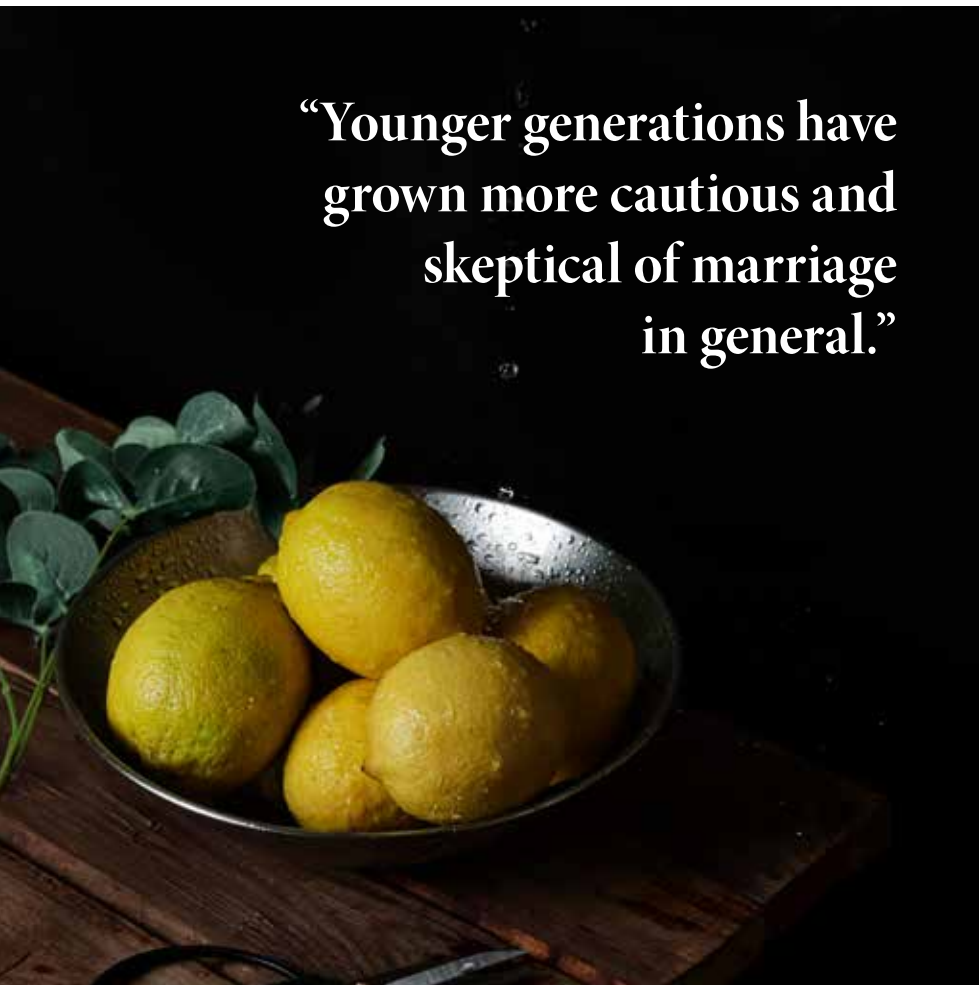
One thing shines through Clever’s study: More people are shrugging off the knee-jerk marital obligation in favor of taking a more considered approach to this commitment.

Cultural Shifts

Until recently, sex before marriage was generally considered disgraceful. Having children out of wedlock brought a certain shame to the family name, disincentivizing such actions. This has largely changed as sex before marriage has become more normalized. Wholesome television shows like “Leave It to Beaver,” “I Love Lucy” and “The Andy Griffith Show” have been replaced with titles that glorify and promote premarital sex. Many shows feature sex as the main subject.

According to data from the National Survey of Family Growth, 95 percent of Americans under age 45 have had sex before marriage. Virtually no one in the United States abstains from having sex until marriage. This trend is common among other Western nations as well.

While some indications show that fornication (sex before marriage) is on the decline among younger people, advancements in technology have made up for the decrease in physical sexual acts. Pornography, while not seen by society as sex before marriage, is viewed

A photograph of a silver bowl filled with several bright yellow lemons, some with green leaves still attached. The bowl sits on a dark wooden surface. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the texture of the lemons and the grain of the wood.

“Younger generations have grown more cautious and skeptical of marriage in general.”

by God as a form of such. The horribly destructive bombardment of porn in today's technological world has left youth without a fighting chance.

According to PR Newswire, 73 percent of teens age 13-17 have watched pornography online, with 54 percent first seeing pornography by age 13. Nearly every young mind has been exposed to sex by their teenage years.

Marriage's Origin

If we were looking for the origins of the internet or computers, we would search an encyclopedia. If we sought out the origins of a word, we would look it up in an etymology dictionary. If we wanted to know more about the origins of our family, we would look up our genealogy in a family tree. So where should we look to find the origins of marriage?

The first book in the Bible is called *Genesis*—meaning the book of *origins*! This is where we find the institution of marriage described for the first time. When God created man (Adam), He said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a help meet for him” (Gen. 2:18).

God's purpose from the start was that a man and woman work together, helping and benefiting one another throughout their lives.

After both Adam and Eve were created, verses 23 and 24 say, “And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man. Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.”

Marriage was created by God and has been on His mind since the beginning of man's creation.

Satan hates everything that God does. He looks to undermine all of God's institutions, especially marriage and family.

Here is why the devil wants to destroy marriages: The physical family types the God Family that He is building into eternity, which will include everyone who diligently fol-

lows His Way and lives according to His Word.

While most never consider that God is building a Family, it should not be hard to grasp, seeing He is called the Father all through the Bible. Similarly, Christ is known both as the Son of God and our elder brother. We, as children of God, should be working toward the awesome goal of entering God's Family for eternity. This is why there is no greater institution on Earth than the family unit—and precisely why Satan wants to destroy it. Marriage is the first thing in his crosshairs!

“God's purpose from the start was that a man and woman work together, helping and benefiting one another throughout their lives.”

So, if marriage is on the decline, might we see a similar decline in religion? The answer is a resounding YES—and is the greatest reason for marriage decline.

Modern forms of Christianity and Judaism are being crowded out by growing numbers of agnostics, atheists and even many fringe belief systems. A headline from *NBC News* says it all: “Why paganism and witchcraft are making a comeback.”

Pew Research shows that Gen Z, those born between 1997 and 2012, are the least religious generation—with one-in-three believing there is no God. This is a sharp contrast to Baby Boomers, of which only 17 percent are atheists.

Another Pew study comparing religious affiliation by generation shows young Millennials are more than three times less likely to identify as Christians than their Baby Boomer predecessors. Over the last 50 years, this precipitous

drop in religion parallels the dramatic drop in marriage.

With religion on the decline, is it any wonder marital priorities have shifted in recent decades? Is it any wonder that examples of divorce and infidelity have turned young people off to marriage? Is it any wonder that fornication has become normal and even encouraged?

Truly, is it any wonder?

Where Is It Headed?

When Paul spoke about marriage in Hebrews 13:4, he called it “honorable”—meaning “valuable, costly, honored, esteemed and beloved.” As the years have gone on, marriage and much of its honor and value have been eroded. What was once treated as something very special and highly desired has been reduced in importance.

What will marriage look like in the future? If today's statistics and trends continue for generations to come, would the concept of marriage simply go away? What does the Bible say?

While there are many forces fighting against this wonderful institution, we can know marriage will *never* be destroyed. Remember, marriage was established by God, picturing His expanding Family. The Bible shows we can look forward to the ultimate marriage yet ahead!

Revelation 19:6-8 says: “And I heard as it were the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thunders, saying, Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigns. Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honor to Him: for the marriage of the Lamb [Jesus Christ] is come, and His wife [the Church] has made herself ready. And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints.”

Never forget why physical marriage holds such importance—it types the great marriage between Christ and the Church in the Kingdom of God! To learn more about the Bible's teaching about marriage, read *The Purpose of Marriage – Ever Obsolete?* and *You Can Build a Happy Marriage* on rcg.org. □

WITH THE growing popularity of disposable e-cigarettes, communities across the U.S. are confronting a new vaping problem: how to safely get rid of millions of small, battery-powered devices that are considered hazardous waste.

For years, the debate surrounding vaping largely centered on its risks for high school and middle school students enticed by flavors like gummy bear, lemonade and watermelon.

But the recent shift toward e-cigarettes that cannot be refilled has created a new environmental dilemma. The devices, which contain nicotine, lithium and other metals, cannot be reused or recycled. Under federal environmental law, they also are not supposed to go in the trash.

U.S. teens and adults are buying roughly 12 million disposable vapes per month. With little federal guidance, local officials are finding their own ways to dispose of e-cigarettes collected from schools, colleges, vape shops and other sites.

“We are in a really weird regulatory place where there is no legal place to put these and yet we know, every year, tens of millions of disposables are thrown in the trash,” said Yogi Hale Hendlin, a health and environmental researcher at the University of California, San Francisco.

In late August, sanitation workers in Monroe County, New York, packed more than 5,500 brightly colored e-cigarettes into 55-gallon steel drums for transport. Their destination? A giant, industrial waste incinerator in northern Arkansas, where they would be melted down.

Sending 350 pounds of vapes across the country to be burned into ash may not sound environmentally friendly. But local officials say it is the only way to keep the nicotine-filled devices out of sewers, waterways and landfills, where their lithium batteries can catch fire.

“These are very insidious devices,” said Michael Garland, who directs the county’s environmental services. “They’re a fire risk and they’re certainly



The Environmental Cost of the E-cigarette Boom

Vaping products are bagged and confiscated during a spot raid of a tobacco store by members of the New York Sheriff’s Joint Compliance Task Force, in New York (Sept. 27, 2023).

AP PHOTO/BEBETO MATTHEWS

an environmental contaminant if not managed properly.”

Elsewhere, the disposal process has become both costly and complicated. In New York City, for example, officials are seizing hundreds of thousands of banned vapes from local stores and spending about 85 cents each for disposal.

Hazardous Waste

Vaping critics say the industry has skirted responsibility for the environmental impact of its products, while federal regulators have failed to force changes that could make vaping components easier to recycle or less wasteful.

Among the possible changes: standards requiring that e-cigarettes be reusable or forcing manufacturers to fund collection and recycling programs.

New York, California and several other states have so-called extended product responsibility laws for computers and other electronics. But those laws do not cover vaping products and there are no comparable federal requirements for any industry.

Environmental Protection Agency rules for hazardous waste do not apply to households, meaning it is legal for someone to throw e-cigarettes in the garbage at home. But most businesses, schools and government facilities are subject to EPA standards in how they handle harmful chemicals like nicotine, which the EPA considers an “acute hazardous waste,” because it can be poisonous at high levels.

In the U.S., the push to manage disposable e-cigarettes has chiefly come



from schools, which can face stricter regulation if they generate more than a few pounds of hazardous waste per month. Monroe County schools pay \$60 to dispose of each one-gallon container of vapes. More than two thirds of the e-cigarettes collected by the county come from schools.

“Our schools were very relieved because they had confiscated so much of this material,” Mr. Garland said. “If you think of all the high schools across the country, they are in a very difficult place right now.”

Lithium in e-cigarette batteries is the same highly sought metal used to power electric vehicles and cellphones. But the quantities used in vaping devices are too small to warrant salvage. And nearly all disposable e-cigarette batteries are soldered into the device, making it impractical to separate them for recycling.

Disposable e-cigarettes currently account for about 53 percent of the

multi-billion dollar U.S. vaping market, according to U.S. government figures, more than doubling since 2020.

Their rise is a study in unintended consequences.

In early 2020, the Food and Drug Administration banned nearly all flavors from reusable e-cigarettes like Juul, the cartridge-based device blamed for sparking a nationwide surge in underage vaping. But the policy did not apply to disposables, opening the door to thousands of new varieties of fruit and candy-flavored vapes, almost all manufactured in China.

In recent months the FDA has begun trying to block imports of several leading disposable brands, including Elf Bar and Esco Bar. Regulators consider them all illegal, but they have been unable to stop their entry to the U.S. and the devices are now ubiquitous in convenience stores, gas stations and other shops.

The FDA’s tobacco chief, Brian King, said in a statement that his agency “will continue to carefully consider the potential environmental impacts” of vaping products.

The Cost of Confiscating

In 2020, New York City outlawed the vast majority of e-cigarette types, banning flavors that can appeal to young people.

City employees conduct thousands of inspections annually, and last year issued more than 2,400 citations to corner stores and bodegas selling illegal flavored products. Adding to the challenge are THC vapes sold at hundreds of unlicensed marijuana shops, a separate but related problem that has mushroomed since New York’s legalization of recreational pot.

Since last November, officials have seized more than 449,000 vape units, according to city figures. New York City is spending about \$1,400 to destroy each container of 1,200 confiscated vapes, but many more remain in city storage lockers.

“I don’t think anyone ever considered the volume of these in our community,” said New York Sheriff Anthony

Miranda, who leads a task force on the issue. “There’s a tremendous amount of resources going into this effort.”

A recent lawsuit against four large vaping distributors aims to recoup some of the city’s costs.

For now, New Yorkers who vape can bring their used e-cigarettes to city-sponsored waste-collection events.

Ultimately those vapes meet a familiar fate: They are shipped to Gum Springs, Arkansas, to be incinerated by Veolia, an international waste management firm. The company has incinerated more than 1.6 million pounds of vaping waste in recent years, mostly unsold inventory or discontinued products.

Veolia executives say burning e-cigarettes’ lithium batteries can damage their incinerators.

“Ideally we don’t want to incinerate them because it has to be done very, very slowly. But if [we] have to, we will,” said Bob Cappadona, who leads the company’s environmental services division.

Veolia also handles e-cigarettes from Boulder County, Colorado, one of the only U.S. jurisdictions that actively tries to recycle e-cigarette batteries and components.

Historically, Boulder has had one of the highest teen vaping rates in the country, peaking at nearly 33 percent in 2017.

“It was like someone flicked the switch. Suddenly e-cigarettes were everywhere,” said Daniel Ryan, principal of Centaurus High School.

Beginning in 2019, county officials began distributing bins to schools for confiscated or discarded e-cigarettes. Last year, they collected 3,500.

County staffers sort the devices by type, separating those with removable batteries for recycling. Disposables are packed and shipped to Veolia’s incinerator. Shelly Fuller, who directs the program, says managing vape waste has gotten more costly and labor intensive with the shift to disposables.

“I kind of miss the days when we had Juuls and I could take each battery out and recycle them very easily,” Ms. Fuller said. “No one has time to dismantle a thousand Esco Bars.” □

The Unfair Toll of EXTREME WEATHER

In Guatemala, Libya, Tanzania—and even the U.S.—extreme weather impacts the poor and vulnerable the most.

A FEW TORTILLAS and a half bowl of reheated beans were all Maria Concepcion Rodriguez had to feed her six children in the isolated village of El Aguacate, one day in August.

Only her three-month-old breast-fed baby had normal height for her age. The others were stunted by under-nourishment. They looked too young for their years.

Juan Carlos is the fourth oldest. At 5 years old, he stands at only about 3 feet.

He is too short for his age, or stunted, according to the World Health Organization standards.

In 2022, 44 percent of children in Guatemala fell outside of the normal height-for-age range, according to UNICEF.

When food runs out, Ms. Rodriguez, 30, asks neighbors for what they can spare. “If they don’t have it, then we don’t eat,” she said, speaking the Mayan language Achi. Like hers, scores of families in El Aguacate do not have enough on their plates.

Guatemala’s rate of stunting is the highest in Latin America, UNICEF data shows.

The rate is more than double that of the region’s second highest, Ecuador. Globally, only seven countries have

higher levels than Guatemala, which is considered an upper-middle income country.

As much as a quarter of Guatemala’s population—up to 4.6 million people—suffered food shortages over the past year, the highest rate since a system called the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification that generates data for the UN began projections for the whole of Guatemala in 2018.

The crisis has coincided with worsening extremes of rainfall and temperature, the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic, and a period of political instability marked by the fight against corruption.

Over the past decade, countries in the region have been hit by longer and deeper droughts as well as a series of hurricanes, causing widespread crop damage.

The hunger crisis in Guatemala highlights a global trend: Extreme weather hits the poor and most vulnerable hardest and more often. They are the ones who most often take the brunt of the impact of storms, floods, fires and other weather upsets.

Such stories from across the globe reveal the ineffectiveness of man’s governments—and should motivate





An aerial view of devastation after the floods in Derna, Libya (Sept. 18, 2023).

HALIL FIDAN/ANADOLU AGENCY VIA GETTY IMAGES



Indigenous women gather on the riverbank in El Aguacate village in Baja Verapaz, Guatemala (Aug. 16, 2023).

REUTERS/PILAR OLIVARES

everyone to pray “Your Kingdom come” (Matt. 6:10) for that time when everyone will rest peacefully “under his vine and under his fig tree; and none shall make them afraid” (Mic. 4:4).

Victims Many Times Over

Abdel-Hamid al-Hassadi survived the devastating flooding in eastern Libya but he lost some 90 people from his extended family.

The 23-year-old law graduate rushed upstairs along with his mother and his elder brother, as heavy rains lashed the city of Derna on the evening of September 10. Soon, torrents of water were washing away buildings next to them.

“We witnessed the magnitude of the catastrophe, Mr. al-Hassadi said in a phone interview from Derna, referring to the massive flooding that engulfed his city. “We have seen our neighbors’ dead bodies washing away in the floods.”

Heavy rains from Mediterranean storm Daniel caused the collapse of the two dams that spanned the narrow valley that divides the city. That sent

a wall of water several meters high through its heart.

The floods inundated as much as a quarter of the city, officials say. Thousands of people were killed, with many dead bodies still under the rubble or at sea, according to search teams. Officials place the death toll at about 11,300.

In New York, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres told the General Assembly that Derna’s residents were “victims many times over” of war and “leaders—near and far—who failed to find a way to peace.”

Extreme weather events exacerbate these problems.

Mr. Guterres continued: “The people of Derna lived and died in the epicenter of that indifference—as the skies unleashed 100 times the monthly rainfall in 24 hours...as dams broke after years of war and neglect...as everything they knew was wiped off the map.”

“Even now, as we speak, bodies are washing ashore from the same Mediterranean Sea where billionaires sunbathe on their superyachts.”

Soon after the flooding, demonstrators crowded into the square in front of

Derna’s landmark gold-domed Sahaba mosque chanting slogans. Some waved flags from atop the mosque’s roof. Later in the evening, they torched the house of Mayor Abdulmenam al-Ghaithi, his office manager told *Reuters*.

Angry residents said the disaster could have been prevented. Officials acknowledge that a contract to repair the dams after 2007 was never completed, blaming insecurity in the area.

Libya has been a failed state for more than a decade, with no government exercising nationwide authority since Muammar Gaddafi was toppled in 2011. Derna has been controlled since 2019 by the Libyan National Army which holds sway in the east. For several years before that it was in the hands of militant groups, including local branches of Islamic State and al Qaeda.

Wealthier Nations Too

While impoverished nations have the most obvious long-term problems from extreme weather, wealthier nations are not immune. And the negative effects in those countries often get overlooked.

For example, hurricanes in the last few decades have killed thousands more people than meteorologists traditionally calculate, a recent epidemiological study found. A disproportionate number of those victims are poor, vulnerable and minorities.

A team of public health and storm experts calculated that from 1988 to 2019 more than 18,000 people likely died, mostly indirectly, because of hurricanes and lesser tropical cyclones in the continental United States. That is 13 times more than the 1,385 people directly killed by storms that the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration figures, but the study authors said those numbers are not directly comparable.

Instead of just looking at people who drowned, were hit by debris or killed directly by the storm, the study published in the journal *Science Advances* examined changes in a storm-hit county's overall number of deaths just before, during and after a hurricane and compared those to normal years. Researchers attributed the excess deaths to the storm, using a standard public health technique.

"It's the difference between how many people died and how many people would have died on a normal day" with no hurricane, said study lead author Robbie Parks, an environmental epidemiologist at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health.

After a storm, deaths spike because of heart and lung problems, infections, injury and mental health issues, Dr. Parks said. It is a stressful time with clean-up and rebuilding.

Dr. Parks said meteorologists do an admirable job counting people killed during the height of the storm, but so many people die indirectly and especially after the storm, he said "it does seem to be an undercount" that misses the poorest and most vulnerable Americans.

"People who have the least means suffer the most," Dr. Parks said. "It's a good opportunity to put a number on that."

Using the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention's social vulnerability index, Dr. Parks divided American counties into the least vulnerable third, the most vulnerable third and the middle, categories that often correlate with the richest, poorest and middle income people. In the case of the heaviest hurricane winds, the most vulnerable third had 57 percent of the excess deaths and least vulnerable had 6 percent.

"It does not surprise me, but deeply saddens me that excess mortality is largest among the most vulnerable segments of our population," said MIT hurricane scientist Kerry Emanuel, who was not part of the study. "It is the poorer people with fewer places to evacuate to and fewer means to get out who take the brunt of the suffering."

Displaced Youth

Storms, floods, fires and other extreme weather events cause an estimated 20 million people to be displaced from their homes each year, Oxfam reported. The trend often involves the youngest in society. More than 43 million dis-

placements involved children between 2016 and 2021, according to a UNICEF report.

More than 113 million displacements of children will occur in the next three decades, estimated the 2023 report, which took into account risks from flooding rivers, cyclonic winds and floods that follow a storm.

Some children, like 10-year-old Shukri Mohamed Ibrahim, are already on the move. Her family left their home in Somalia after dawn prayers on a Saturday morning five months ago.

The worst drought in more than 50 years scorched the once-fertile pastures the family relied on, leaving them barren. So, bundling only a few clothes and some utensils into sacks, they moved to a camp in the capital Mogadishu, where Shukri, who dreams of being a doctor, is now going to school for the first time. That is a plus, but the camp lacks proper shelter and sanitation, and food is scarce.

"We need something that can protect us from the heat during the day and the cold at night," Shukri said.

Rescue teams assist in relief work in Libya's eastern city of Derna following deadly flash floods (Sept. 17, 2023).

KARIM SAHIB/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES



The miseries of long, drawn-out disasters like droughts are often underreported. Children had to leave their homes at least 1.3 million times because of drought in the years covered by the report—more than half of them in Somalia—but this is likely an undercount, the report said. Unlike during floods or storms, there are no pre-emptive evacuations during a drought.

Nearly a third, or 43 million of the 134 million times that people were uprooted from their homes due to extreme weather from 2016-21 included children. Nearly half were forced from their homes by storms. Of those, nearly 4 of the 10 displacements were in the Philippines.

Floods displaced children more than 19 million times in places like India and China. Wildfires impacted children 810,000 times in the U.S. and Canada.

Data tracking migrations because of weather extremes typically do not differentiate between children and adults. UNICEF worked with a Geneva-based nonprofit, the International Displacement Monitoring Center, to map where kids were most impacted.

The Philippines, India and China had the most child displacement by climate hazards, accounting for nearly half. Those countries also have vast populations and strong systems to evacuate people, which makes it easier for them to record data.

But, on average, children living in the Horn of Africa or on a small island in the Caribbean are more vulnerable. Many are enduring “overlapping crises”—where risks from climate extremes are compounded by conflict, fragile institutions and poverty, one of the report’s authors stated.

Leaving home subjects children to extra risks.

During unprecedented flooding of the Yamuna River in July in the Indian capital New Delhi, churning waters washed away the hut that was home to 10-year-old Garima Kumar’s family.

The waters also took her school uniform and her schoolbooks. Garima



People work to free a vehicle stuck on the shoulder amid storm debris as Hurricane Idalia crosses the state near Mayo, Florida (Aug. 30, 2023).

SEAN RAYFORD/GETTY IMAGES

lived with her family on sidewalks of the megacity and missed a month of school.

“Other students in the school teased me because my house had been flooded. Because we do not have a permanent home,” Garima said.

After the floodwaters receded, the family began repairing their home last month—a process Garima’s mother Meera Devi said they are having to do over and over again as floods are becoming more common. Her father, Shiv Kumar, has not had any work for over a month. The family’s only income is the mother’s \$2 daily earnings as a domestic helper.

Children are more vulnerable because they are dependent on adults. This puts them at the risk of being exploited and not having protections, said Mimi Vu, a Vietnam-based expert on human trafficking and migration issues who was not involved with the report.

“When you’re desperate, you do things that you normally wouldn’t do.

And unfortunately, children often bear the brunt of that because they are the most vulnerable and they don’t have the ability to stand up for themselves,” she said.

In estimating future risks, the report did not include wildfires and drought, or potential mitigation measures. It said vital services like education and health care need to become “shock-responsive, portable and inclusive,” to help children and their families better cope with disasters. This would mean considering children’s needs at different stages, from ensuring they have opportunities to study, that they can stay with their families and that eventually they can find work.

“We have the tools. We have the knowledge. But we’re just not working fast enough,” one of the report’s authors said.

Continuing Trend

Experts see the trend of extreme weather disproportionately impacting Earth’s most vulnerable as here to stay. Why?

Because many of them are forced to move into harm's way.

Since 1985, the number of the world's settlements in the riskiest flood zones has increased 122 percent, compared to 80 percent for the safest areas, according to a study published in the journal *Nature* by researchers at the World Bank. The authors looked at settlement extent and expansion using satellites instead of population, with the world's built-up regions growing 85 percent overall from 1985 to 2015.

"People are on a search for better lives and better jobs and then sort of get stuck in bad lands because that's what they can afford," said study co-author Stephane Hallegatte, a World Bank senior climate adviser and expert on disaster economics. He said they know it is dangerous when they arrive.

The problem is driven by middle- and low-income countries, the study found. Richer countries like the United States and parts of Europe are seeing more growth in safer areas than flood-prone ones and the poorest nations have not quite developed as heavily in flood-prone areas, it said.

China and Vietnam both saw their settlement extent more than tripling in the past 30 years, increasing far more than their dry land areas. Most countries, especially in East Asia, saw more settlements in regular flood zones and ultra high flood zones than in dry areas. Libya, which suffered from devastating flooding last month, had an 83 percent increase in settlement extent in the worst flood zones. Pakistan, also the victim of catastrophic flooding both last year and this year, had an 89 percent increase.

What is happening is that as a nation grows a bit wealthier, there is a change from rural to urban and people leave the country to go to cities, which are often near waterways that flood in places, said study lead author Jun Rentschler, a World Bank economist.

"What we're trying to do with the study is to track the process of urban development over time," Mr. Rentschler said. "What you would expect is that initially you settle in a safe space, but as the city expands, it's more likely to grow into areas that it

previously avoided, flood zones for instance."

Then comes the issue of whether it is cheaper to fortify these dangerous areas or better to move people out, the study authors said.

Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, is a poster city for this problem, they said. It boomed from a fishing village of about 83,000 people in 1950 to more than 7 million people now, according to World Population Review.

This city has an estimated 70 percent of the population living in unplanned settlements. Each individual there is just one of the millions across the globe for whom extreme weather is a part of their everyday lives.

Back in drought-stricken Guatemala, Maria Concepcion Rodriguez and her husband are too poor to even consider migration. She starts a fire, the only way to cook in her home, where she has no running water or electricity.

Smoke fills her dirt-floor adobe house, where the family shares a few hammocks for sleeping. She warms the leftover beans and prepares the tortillas. □



An airboat travels through flood waters in the downtown area after Hurricane Idalia passed offshore in Crystal River, Florida (Aug. 30, 2023).

JOE RAEDLE/GETTY IMAGES



From Romance to Robocalls Keeping Yourself Safe from Scams

Wisdom from ancient times can help us avoid
modern technology traps.

BY EDWARD L. WINKFIELD

SCAMMING PEOPLE out of their money is not new—as the saying goes, “There is no new thing under the sun” (Ecc. 1:9). However, technology has made scams more prevalent and sophisticated.

In 2021, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) received reports of fraud from 2.8 million consumers, resulting in \$2.3 billion in losses. Imposter schemes and online shopping fraud accounted for \$392 million of those losses. By 2022, fraud losses skyrocketed to \$8.8 billion, largely

from investment scams, especially cryptocurrency fraud, which doubled to \$3.8 billion.

Where do most of these scams occur? Online fraud is rampant, with 77 percent of scams occurring on social media. In the past year, Facebook Marketplace impersonation doubled, and on WhatsApp, it tripled. The anonymity available via the platforms lures scammers.

Surprisingly, young adults aged 20-29 report more frequent losses due to scams than those aged 70-79,

according to the FTC. However, older adults tend to lose more money because scammers target their substantial assets, including savings, pensions, life insurance and property.

Scammers persistently adapt to our new tech habits, capitalizing on consumer novelty and emotions.

Kathleen Peters, Chief Innovation Officer at Experian Decision Analytics in North America, emphasized the need for businesses and consumers to stay vigilant in the face of rising scams. “Businesses and consumers need to be

aware of the creativity and agility that fraudsters are using today, especially in our digital-first world,” she said.

The Bible provides guidance to avoid tech scams, offering practical insights for all areas of life. Its advice is akin to that of a trusted loved one or confidant.

Scripture emphasizes wisdom. Armed with wisdom and knowledge of how scams work, we can better avoid them. Proverbs 4:6 advises, “Do not forsake wisdom, and she will protect you; love her, and she will watch over you” (New International Version).

Being proactive helps shield us from being ripped off. Proverbs 22:3 states, “A prudent man foresees the evil, and hides himself: but the simple pass on, and are punished.” And Proverbs 14:15 warns, “The simple believes every word: but the prudent man looks well to his going.”

Critical thinking is essential.

To defend yourself against fraud, staying informed about the latest scam tactics and using common sense is essential. We will discuss some of the most common scams and provide practical measures to help you protect yourself.

Robocall Scams

Simply being aware of typical scams can help, experts say. Robocalls in particular frequently target vulnerable individuals like seniors, people with disabilities and people with debt.

“If you get a robocall out of the blue playing a recorded message trying to get you to buy something, just hang up,” said James Lee, chief operating officer at the Identity Theft Resource Center. “Same goes for texts—anytime you get them from a number you don’t know asking you to pay, wire, or click on something suspicious.”

Mr. Lee urges consumers to hang up and call the company or institution in question at an official number.

Scammers will also often imitate someone in authority, such as a tax or debt collector. They might pretend to be a loved one calling to request immediate financial assistance for bail, legal help or a hospital bill.

Romance Scams

During the pandemic, more people turned to dating apps and social media to seek love, allowing fraudsters to forge trusted relationships without meeting in person. This shift was significant. From January 1 to July 31, 2021, the FBI Internet Crime Complaint Center received over 1,800 complaints about online romance scams, resulting in \$133 million in losses. Experian predicts that romance scams will continue to rise as fraudsters exploit these connections to request money for various reasons.

“The Bible provides guidance to avoid tech scams, offering practical insights for all areas of life. Its advice is akin to that of a trusted loved one or confidant.”

According to Will Maxson, assistant director of the Division of Marketing Practices at the FTC, “romance scams” often target lonely and isolated individuals. These scams can take place over more extended periods—even years.

Kate Kleinart, 70, who lost tens of thousands to a romance scam over several months, said to be vigilant if a new Facebook friend is exceptionally good-looking, asks you to download WhatsApp to communicate, attempts to isolate you from friends and family, or gets romantic very quickly.

“If you’re seeing that picture of a very handsome person, ask someone younger in your life—a child, a grandchild, a niece or a nephew—to help you reverse-image search or identify the photo,” she said.

She said the man in the pictures she received was a plastic surgeon from Spain whose photos had been stolen and used by scammers.

Ms. Kleinart had also been living under lockdown during the early pandemic when she got the initial friend request, and the companionship and communication meant a lot to her while she was cut off from the family. When the scam fell apart, she missed the relationship even more than her lost savings.

“Losing the love was worse than losing the money,” she said.

Investment Scams

Investment scams, often promoted through social media or online ads, are enticing get-rich-quick schemes. Scammers bolster their claims with various “testimonials” from other social media accounts. Many of these scams now revolve around cryptocurrency, taking advantage of its novelty and the allure of being part of the “next big thing.”

Cryptocurrency schemes are particularly appealing to scammers because they allow easy extraction, storage and concealment of stolen funds. For those willing to invest in digital currencies, caution is advised. Implementing multiple layers of authentication and using a “hard wallet” or “cold storage” (methods that involve keeping digital assets partially or completely offline, often using physical records) are initial security steps.

While legitimate cryptocurrency projects do exist, gaining proper market education is crucial for investors. To safeguard against fraud, the FTC recommends independent research of the company, including searches for terms like “review” or “scam” along with the company’s name.

However, the complexity of cryptocurrency and blockchain investments can leave many individuals feeling uncertain. This underscores the ongoing need for education and understanding in this evolving space.

Quiz Scams

Beware of quiz scams on platforms like Facebook or Google. They might seem harmless, asking about your interests in things like cars or TV shows, but they

have ulterior motives. They may also ask you to take a personality test.

Despite these benign-seeming questions, scammers can then use the personal information you share to respond to security questions from your accounts or hack your social media to send malware links to your contacts.

To protect your personal information, the FTC simply recommends steering clear of online quizzes. The commission also advises consumers to use random answers for security questions.

“Asked to enter your mother’s maiden name? Say it’s something else: Parmesan or another word you’ll remember,” advises Terri Miller, consumer education specialist at the FTC. “This way, scammers won’t be able to use information they find to steal your identity.”

Marketplace Scams

When buying or selling products on Instagram or Facebook Marketplace, keep in mind that not everyone who reaches out to you has the best intentions.

To avoid being scammed when selling via an online platform, the FTC recommends checking buyers’ profiles,

not sharing any codes sent to your phone or email and avoiding accepting online payments from unknown persons.

Likewise, when buying something from an online marketplace, make sure to research the seller diligently. Look at whether the profile is verified, what kind of reviews they have, and the terms and conditions of the purchase.

Gift Cards

Regarding gift cards, both Mr. Maxson and Mr. Lee said any mention of payment with gift cards should be a blaring warning alarm.

Ms. Kleinart, who experienced the romance scam, was also initially asked to send money via gift cards, with varied explanations.

“Just don’t pay people with gift cards,” Mr. Maxson said. “No legitimate company or individual is going to ask you to buy large quantities of gift cards and then read the numbers off the cards. That is exclusively a payment method of fraudsters.”

“Let me tell you, the IRS does not accept gift cards,” Mr. Lee said. “But you’d be surprised by the number of

people who fall for people calling from ‘fill in the blank agency’ or ‘fill in the blank company’ and who send \$500 worth of gift cards.”

Text and Email Scams

In 2022, consumers lost more than \$326 million from scam texts alone, according to the FTC.

Emails can be just as misleading. Phishing is a popular type of email scam where scammers send fraudulent emails to deceive people into clicking on unsafe links or revealing personal information. These emails often impersonate trustworthy sources to gain the victim’s trust.

Spear phishing is a more personalized version of phishing, in which scammers target a specific individual and create emails that appear to be from someone they know or trust, such as a friend or co-worker.

In both cases, it is essential to be cautious and not fall for these tricks. Always verify the sender’s email address and double-check if something seems suspicious before taking any action. “I think anyone who has participated in the digital economy has received multiple attempts daily that have some

PROTECT AGAINST CYBERATTACKS

How to stay safe online



Sources: educba.com; cisa.gov; consumer.ftc.gov



Check website URL

Pay attention to the URLs of websites you visit. Malicious websites sometimes use a variation in common spelling or a different domain to deceive unsuspecting users.



Keep your personal information private

Do not share personal information unless you are sure about the authentication of a legitimate website. Also, change passwords regularly.



Be suspicious of unknown links

Never click an unusual link in a text or email, instead go to the site and call the number listed.

sort of scheme, whether that's, 'Your account has been locked' or 'Your package delivery is delayed,'" Mr. Lee said. "Again—just take a breath—and verify," he added.

Mr. Lee urges people never to click an unusual link in a text or email and instead go to the site in question directly or call the number listed on the official site.

"It'll take 30 or 40 seconds longer, but go ahead and do that because it could save you a lot of money every time," he said.

Some indications to be extra wary could include an unrecognized sender, unusual wording, or a tell-tale misspelling.

Brand Impersonation Scams

Brand impersonation is a more sophisticated form of phishing where cybercriminals pretend to be a trusted company or brand to deceive people into revealing sensitive information. This scam can take even more diligence to discern.

In 2022, brand impersonation saw a rise in the use of procedurally generated graphics in attacks. This means scammers use HTML and CSS to dis-

play logos of well-known companies like Microsoft or Chase in phishing attacks. This makes the threats appear more genuine and helps them bypass image analysis technology. To undiscerning individuals, it would seem as if the email came from the actual company.

To guard against brand impersonation scams, exercise caution with unsolicited emails, calls, or messages. Independently verify the sender's identity through official sources like the company's website or customer service. Avoid clicking suspicious links or downloading attachments from unexpected sources, especially if the communication seems unusual or contains misspellings. By following these steps, you can significantly reduce the risk of falling victim to brand impersonation scams and protect your personal information and finances.

Technology Support Scams

These scams involve fraudsters using scare tactics to trick individuals into paying for unnecessary technical support services to fix a non-existent device or software issue. This can lead to high charges or even data theft.

Scammers have employed different tactics, including impersonating well-known brands like McAfee, Norton and Windows Defender. To evade security filters, criminals have used techniques like brand obfuscation, hiding phone numbers, incorporating images, sending emails from reputable domains, and more.

Protect yourself from technology support scams by being cautious of unsolicited contact, whether through phone calls, emails or pop-ups. Verify the caller's identity by independently confirming it through official customer support channels. Never grant remote access to your device to unverified individuals. Avoid sharing personal information, and do not rush into decisions. Keep your security software up-to-date, and regularly update your device's operating system software to ensure protection against vulnerabilities.

In the expansive digital world, the risks are ever-present but do not have to be overwhelming. By committing to vigilance, verifying messages and engaging online with caution, we can significantly reduce our vulnerability to scams and continue to enjoy the benefits of our digital age with confidence. □



Keep software updated

Make sure that your computer and mobile devices are running the latest software updates. This helps to protect against security vulnerabilities.



Use the cloud

Back up your files at least once per week. Save backup files to a removable hard disk or the cloud if it is possible to encrypt them with a strong encryption algorithm.



Avoid scams via online platforms

When buying something from an online marketplace, make sure to research the seller diligently and avoid sending electronic payments.



Strong passwords

Use strong passwords for your online accounts and enable two-factor authentication whenever possible. This adds an extra layer of security to your accounts.



Do not answer robocalls

If you get a call out of the blue playing a recorded message trying to get you to buy something, just hang up.



Always verify tech support calls

Be cautious of unsolicited support contact, whether through phone calls, emails or pop-ups.



Protect your devices with an antivirus

Always download and install antivirus updates for your operating system.



Make sure Wi-Fi settings are secure

Secure your Wi-Fi networks and control access to your personal networks.



Be wary of high return investments

Investment scams often promise high returns with little or no risk.

Do You Believe in Angels?

Most Americans think angels exist, yet few understand their great purpose.

BY JAMES E. HABBOUSH

COMPARED WITH the devil, angels carry more credence in America.

Angels inspire even more belief than the traditional view of hell. More people believe in these beings than astrology, reincarnation, and the belief that physical things can have spiritual energies.

In fact, about 7 in 10 U.S. adults say they believe in angels, according to a recent poll by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

“People are yearning for something greater than themselves—beyond their own understanding,” said Jack Grogger, a chaplain for the Los Angeles Angels and a longtime Southern California fire

captain who has aided many people in their gravest moments.

That search for something bigger, he said, can take on many forms, from following a religion to crafting a self-driven purpose to believing in, of course, angels.

Yet most take angels’ existence for granted, retaining views developed early in life. Stunning visuals in movies often flavor their perspectives.

The fascination with angelic beings is anything but modern. Visit any major art museum, and you will see centuries-old portrayals of these winged creations in earthly and heavenly scenes. People have, as Mr. Grogger put it, yearned for “something greater than themselves” for all human history.

Some believe a guardian angel looks over them at every turn. Others believe these beings take a more hands-off approach, largely disconnected from the here and now, merely inhabiting heaven and observing the affairs of mankind.

The large number of U.S. adults who say they believe in angels includes 84 percent of those with a religious affiliation—94 percent of evangelical Protestants, 81 percent of mainline Protestants and 82 percent of Catholics—and 33 percent of those without one. And of those angel-believing religiously unaffiliated, that includes 2 percent of atheists, 25 percent of agnostics and 50 percent of those identified as “nothing in particular.”

Perhaps you have even heard sermons on the subject in one of the world's 2,000-plus denominations and sects of Christianity. The Bible certainly does have much to say on the subject, yet confusion abounds about these spiritual beings.

Do those who believe in angels—including you—*really* know what they are?

Word of Caution

There is a clear reason why angels are so popular: As human beings, we were designed to look to a higher power. We were designed to seek understanding outside of what can be learned through experience. As the prophet Jeremiah concluded, "I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walks to direct his steps" (Jer. 10:23).

The thinking person realizes that people do not instinctively have all the answers. Rather than trending toward peace, safety and prosperity, mankind is collectively moving ever-increasingly toward war, chaos and economic depression. Something is wrong, and the desire to look beyond the physical realm to the spiritual to find answers is natural.

But with more than two-thirds of the U.S. population acknowledging the existence of angels, there are many ideas and beliefs about these beings—most of them wrong. In fact, a wrong focus on angels can place "believers" in grave danger!

Consider the first of the Ten Commandments: "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Ex. 20:3). This blunt instruction leaves no room for misunderstanding. While angels have a great purpose, they are *not* to be worshipped—only God is!

Clear Origins

People have been fascinated by these spirit beings since first interacting with angels in the Garden of Eden. After Adam and Eve's fateful decision, God "drove out the man; and He placed at the east of the garden of Eden cherubim, and a flaming sword which

turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life" (Gen. 3:24). This began mankind's little-understood relationship with these powerful lifeforms.

In the book of Job, God asked the patriarch a series of pointed questions. These establish His superiority to mankind, but also reveal a clue as to just how long angels have existed.

Notice: "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Declare, if you have understanding. Who has laid the measures thereof, if you know? Or who has stretched the line upon [measured] it? Whereupon are the foundations thereof fastened? Or who laid the cornerstone thereof; when the *morning stars* sang together, and all the *sons of God* shouted for joy?" (Job 38:4-7).

Understand what is being said here. "Morning stars" and "sons of God" are both terms for angels. They were already in existence when the Earth was created billions of years ago!

An aside: Note that the Earth referenced above is the same Earth God created "in the beginning" in Genesis 1:1. The recreation and resurfacing of Earth explained in Genesis 1:2 occurred only about 6,000 years ago, with the purpose of making it habitable for human beings. To learn more about the planet's creation and recreation, read our *Real Truth* article "Is the Earth 6,000 Years Old?"

Fallen Angels

Understanding what the Bible teaches about angels is inseparable from learning what it says about *fallen* angels, also known as demons. Before being driven from Eden, our first parents were deceived by the greatest of these corrupted beings: Satan the devil.

His creation is specifically outlined in Ezekiel 28: "You have been in Eden the garden of God; every precious stone was your covering, the sardius, topaz, and the diamond, the beryl, the onyx, and the jasper, the sapphire, the emerald, and the carbuncle, and gold..." (vs. 13). This was a brilliant being, the pinnacle of God's creation to that point.

The passage continues, "...the workmanship of your tabrets and of your pipes [musical instruments specially fashioned for the one previously called Lucifer] was prepared in you in the day that you were created. You are the anointed cherub that covers; and I have set you so: you were upon the holy mountain of God; you have walked up and down in the midst of the stones of fire. You were perfect in your ways from the day that you were created, till iniquity was found in you" (vs. 13-15).

Not only was Satan created in "perfect" form—like all angels—he also had special access to God's throne.

With this access came great temptation. Satan became so confident in his own ability and power that he believed himself qualified to assume God's role as supreme ruler of the universe.

Notice the prophet Isaiah's description of the devil's hubris: "How are you fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How are you cut down to the ground, which did weaken the nations! For you have said in your heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north: I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High" (14:12-14). This final phrase is a mistranslation and should actually read, "I will be the most High."

Take a moment to appreciate the difference. Satan's goal was not to be *LIKE* the most High. His goal was to *BE* the most High!

The devil today leads vast hordes of fallen angels—demons—bent on thwarting God's purpose for mankind. We will later see how righteous angels *assist* in God's great Plan.

All Around Us

Though we cannot see them, angelic beings—good and bad—are numerous and all around us. II Kings 6:17 records an account of a human's eyes being opened to the presence of angels who were to protect ancient Israel: "Elisha prayed, and said, LORD, I pray you, open his eyes, that he may see. And

the LORD opened the eyes of the young man; and he saw: and, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha.”

Before continuing, come to grips with the fact that these invisible beings are real, have existed far longer than mankind and are currently far superior to us in power.

In acknowledging their power, we must be cautious. All too often, an undue focus on angels opens the door to the demonic spirit realm.

The broad acceptance is what fascinates San Francisco-based witch and author Devin Hunter: Angels show up independently in different religions and traditions, making them part of the fabric that unites humanity.

“We’re all getting to the same conclusion,” said Mr. Hunter, who spent 16 years as a professional medium, and started communicating as a child with what he believed were angels.

Mr. Hunter estimates that a belief in angels applies to about half of those practicing modern witchcraft today, and for some who do not believe, their rejection is often rooted in the religious trauma they experienced growing up.

“Angels become a very big deal” for long-time practitioners who have made occultism their primary focus, he said. “We cannot escape them in any way, shape or form.”

Whether witting or unwitting, seeking and establishing contact with “angels” invariably puts individuals in contact with the wrong kind—demons! Human beings are designed to SEEK GOD! Do not listen to any “authority” that tells you otherwise.

Others have a vaguer conception of angels, such as Jennifer Goodwin of Oviedo, Florida. She is unsure if God exists and rejects the afterlife dichotomy of heaven and hell, but the recent deaths of her parents solidified her views on these celestial beings.

Ms. Goodwin believes her parents are still keeping an eye on the family—not in any physical way or as a supernatural apparition, but that they manifest in those moments when she feels a general sense of comfort.

“I think that they are around us, but it’s in a way that we can’t understand,” Ms. Goodwin said. “I don’t know what else to call it except an angel.”

While less dangerous than seeking contact with angels or dabbling in the occult, this concept is also wrong, no matter how sincere. King Solomon wrote, “The dead know not anything” (Ecc. 9:5). They do not manifest themselves to the living in any form.

Yet far from a bleak consignment to the darkness of death forever, God’s purpose has always been to resurrect—bring back!—the dead. As Jesus Christ explained, “...all that are in the graves shall hear His voice, and shall come forth...” (John 5:28-29).

“In acknowledging their power, we must be cautious. All too often, an undue focus on angels opens the door to the demonic spirit realm.”

But angels should comfort us in another way—as part of God’s Master Plan.

The Human-Angel Relationship

Not only is an incorrect focus on angels dangerous, it obscures their true nature—and our awesome potential as humans.

The apostle Paul in Hebrews 1 explained the big-picture purpose of angels in relation to God and human beings. “God...has in these last days spoken unto us by His Son [Jesus Christ], whom He has appointed heir of all things, by whom also He made the worlds; who being the brightness of His glory, and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down on

the right hand of the Majesty on high” (vs. 1-3).

God not only appointed Christ “heir of all things” but also put in place a plan for Him to “purge our sins.”

Verse 4 explains that Jesus was “made so much better than the angels, as He has by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they.”

Paul then quotes the Psalms, asking, “For unto which of the angels said He at any time, you are My Son, this day have I begotten you? And again, I will be to him a Father, and he shall be to Me a Son?” (Heb. 1:5). Understand. Angels are not in a Father-Son relationship with God—Jesus Christ is.

Verse 6 establishes the unmistakable relationship between Christ and angels and offers the first hint about our supreme purpose: “And again, when He brings in the firstbegotten into the world, He says, And let all the angels of God worship Him.”

Notice the word firstbegotten. “First” implies subsequent “begettals.” Just as human parents beget multiple children, the almighty God intends to beget additional sons and daughters of His own. And just as Christ the firstbegotten is worshipped by angels, so will God’s other children.

Romans 8 explains: “We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose. For whom He did foreknow, He also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among *many brethren*” (vs. 28-29).

Do not miss what is being said. Your ultimate potential is to be born into the Family of God—a staggering opportunity not offered to angels. But angels are charged to help us achieve this sonship.

Ministering Spirits

Hebrews 1:7-12 continues establishing Christ’s superiority to angels, culminating in verses 13-14: “But to which of the angels said He at any time, Sit on my right hand, until I make Your enemies Your footstool? Are they not

all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?”

Human beings inhabit the physical realm, bound by time and space. It is in God’s interests to keep Christians alive and on track while they build His character, qualifying for the gift of salvation—what we just saw to be sonship in God’s Family. There are times when unseen dangers could cut life short, necessitating angelic intervention from beings who are not subject to the laws of physics.

Later in Hebrews, Paul reveals that angels can take on human form, disguising themselves when necessary (13:2).

Continuing the thread from chapter 1, mankind’s role in the God Family begins to clarify: “For unto the angels has He not put in subjection the world to come, whereof we speak. But one in a certain place testified, saying, What is man, that You are mindful of him? Or the son of man, that You visit him?” (2:5-6).

Paul, quoting King David, marveled that God would entrust the coming Kingdom of God—the “world to come”—to mankind! Yet the scope of rulership is larger than even this.

Continuing: “You [God] made him [man] a little lower than the angels; You crowned him with glory and honor, and did set him over the works of Your hands: You have put all things in subjection under his feet. For in that He put all in subjection under him, He left nothing that is not put under him. But now we see not yet all things put under him” (vs. 7-8).

Put plainly, angels exist as helpers “in the background” ensuring we are unobstructed in pursuit of membership in the Family of God.

Read David C. Pack’s book *The Awesome Potential of Man* at rcg.org/tapom to more fully understand these ministering spirits and the ultimate potential they help human beings to achieve.

You now know what few do—that the truth about angels is far more wonderful than any false alternative! □

Just a Decoration?

From ornaments on trees to the belief that Jesus was born on December 25, there are countless popular customs and traditions associated with the Christmas holiday.

Where did it originate? From the Bible or paganism? Does it really matter? Where did Santa Claus come from? What about things like mistletoe, holly wreaths and the custom of exchanging gifts? Many are concerned about putting Christ back into Christmas. Was He ever there?

Order your free copy of *The True Origin of Christmas* at rcg.org/ttooc for the answers!



the Kingdom of God. He knew most would not be willing to believe direct statements from the Bible. He recognized that conditions on Earth would create an anti-faith atmosphere, making it very difficult for people to believe even the plainest scriptures. He knew few would be willing to take God's promises at face value!

Jesus promised 2,000 years ago that He would build His Church. It would be composed of the few—not the many—who would be willing to believe God and live by faith and every word of God (Luke 12:32; Hab. 2:4; Rom. 1:17; Matt. 4:4; Luke 4:4; Deut. 8:3). Faith and healing are inseparable. You cannot be healed without true faith. To learn more, read my free booklet *What Is Real Faith?* at rcg.org/wirf.

Old Testament Record

Does healing first appear in the New Testament? Certainly Jesus and the apostles performed miracles and healed many who were sick. It is commonly supposed these things first happened in the New Testament, and for the sole purpose of proving Christ was the Messiah. This is simply not true. Healing did not first appear in the New Testament. The Old Testament records numerous dramatic healings. It is here that God *first* reveals Himself as the One who heals. As we read various accounts and scriptures, you must be willing to believe what the Bible says.

Almost immediately after God delivered Israel from Egypt, He had to perform a miracle just for them to have water to drink. This is when He revealed Himself as the God who heals. Notice: "If you will diligently hearken to the voice of the LORD your God, and will do that which is right in His sight, and will give ear to His commandments, and keep all His statutes, I will put none of these diseases upon you, which I have brought upon the

Egyptians: for *I am the LORD that heals you*" (Ex. 15:26).

In the Old Testament, God uses several names to designate who and what He is. He just introduced Himself as *Yahweh-Rapha*, meaning the "God who heals"—or the "healing God."

Soon after, God told Israel they were not to serve any other gods. Obedience would invoke this promise: "You shall not bow down to their gods, nor serve them, nor do after their works...you shall serve the LORD your God, and He shall bless your bread, and your water; and I will take sickness away from the midst of you" (Ex. 23:24-25).

God added this: "The LORD will take away from you [heal] all sickness, and will put none of the evil diseases of Egypt, which you know, upon you," (Deut. 7:15) and then, "See now that I, even I, am He, and there is no god with Me: I kill, and I make alive; I wound, and I heal" (Deut. 32:39). In these plain verses, God establishes Himself as our Healer.

King David knew this. Notice: "Have mercy upon me, O LORD; for I am weak: O LORD, heal me; for my bones are vexed," (Psa. 6:2) and "LORD, be merciful unto me: heal my soul; for I have sinned against You" (Psa. 41:4) After these kinds of prayers, David could say, "O Lord my God, I cried unto You, and You have healed me" (Psa. 30:2).

David also prayed, "Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits" (Psa. 103:2). Most today do not understand that there are many wonderful benefits to serving God, who is often depicted as a God of "Thou shalt nots" instead of a God who desires to bless His people. David knew God is always willing to forgive and heal every sickness and disease. Notice the very next verse: "Who forgives all your iniquities [sins]; who heals *all your diseases*" (vs. 3).

Sometimes people become sick through foolishness—poor diet, lack of rest or wrong living and thinking. Others are injured in accidents due to carelessness. God is still willing to forgive such people—and heal them. Consider: "Fools because of their trans-

gression, and because of their iniquities, are afflicted...and they draw near unto the gates of death. Then they cry unto the LORD in their trouble, and He saves them out of their distresses. He sent His word, and healed them, and delivered them from their destructions" (Psa. 107:17-20).

Notice Psalm 103:3 said in the same verse that God forgives all iniquity (law-breaking) and heals all diseases. David asked God for mercy in Psalm 41. Mercy is required when forgiveness is necessary. Healing involves the forgiveness of physical sins.

No doctor, drug or medication can forgive sin—only God can do this! It is vital we understand why healing and forgiveness of sin are often mentioned together. God is the only One who can do either!

A story from the life of King Hezekiah holds valuable lessons for us today. Here is the account: "In those days was Hezekiah sick unto death. And the prophet Isaiah...came to him, and said...Thus says the LORD, Set your house in order; for you shall die, and not live. Then he turned his face to the wall, and prayed to the LORD, saying, I beseech You, O LORD, remember now how I have walked before You in truth and with a perfect heart, and have done that which is good in Your sight. And Hezekiah wept sore...It came to pass, afore Isaiah was gone out into the middle court, that the word of the LORD came to him, saying, Turn again, and tell Hezekiah the captain of My people, Thus says the LORD, the God of David your father, I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears: behold, I will heal you...And I will add unto your days 15 years...and he recovered" (II Kings 20:1-7).

Hezekiah tearfully sought God in faith. He did not rush to a hospital or seek doctors. He sought to overturn God's will through prayer. God is ready and eager to heal anyone who seeks Him today—including *you*.

There is much more to learn about the Bible's teaching on healing. Read my thorough free booklet, *The Truth About Healing* at rcg.org/ttahe. □

Mexico's Supreme Court Decriminalizes Abortion Nationwide



A woman holds up a sign with a message that reads in Spanish, "My body doesn't want your opinion" at a protest on International Safe Abortion Day, in Toluca, Mexico (Sept. 28, 2022).

ARTURO HERNANDEZ/NURPHOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES

Mexico City (AP) – Mexico's Supreme Court decriminalized abortion nationwide, two years after ruling that abortion was not a crime in one northern state.

That earlier ruling had set off a grinding process of decriminalizing abortion state by state. Recently, the

central state of Aguascalientes became the 12th state to decriminalize the procedure. Judges in states that still criminalize abortion will have to take account of the top court's ruling.

The Supreme Court wrote on X, the platform formerly known as Twitter, that it had decided that "the legal

system that criminalized abortion in the Federal Penal Code is unconstitutional, [because] it violates the human rights of women and people with the ability to gestate."

The court's sweeping decision comes amid a trend in Latin America of loosening restrictions on abortion, even as access has been limited in parts of the United States. Some American women were already seeking the help of Mexican abortion activists to obtain the pills used to end their pregnancies.

Mexico City was the first Mexican jurisdiction to decriminalize abortion 15 years ago.

The Information Group for Chosen Reproduction, known by its Spanish initials as GIRE, said the court decided that the portion of the federal penal code that criminalized abortion no longer has any effect.

"No woman or pregnant person, nor any health worker will be able to be punished for abortion," the non-governmental organization said in a statement.

The impact also means that the federal public health service and any federal health institution must offer abortion to anyone who requests it, GIRE said. The court ordered that the crime of abortion be removed from the federal penal code.

Across Latin America, countries have made moves to lift abortion restrictions in recent years, often referred to as a "green wave."

After decades of work by feminist activists across the region, the wave picked up speed in Argentina, which in 2020 legalized the procedure. In 2022, Colombia, a highly conservative country, also decriminalized abortion.

However, this development may not translate to expanded abortion access in highly conservative and religious countries in the region, many organizers say. □

ACT Test Scores for U.S. Students Drop to New 30-year Low

High school students' scores on the ACT college admissions test have dropped to their lowest in more than three decades, showing a lack of student preparedness for college-level coursework, according to the nonprofit organization that administers the test.

Scores have been falling for six consecutive years, but the trend accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Students in the class of 2023 whose scores were recently reported were in their first year of high school when the virus reached the U.S.

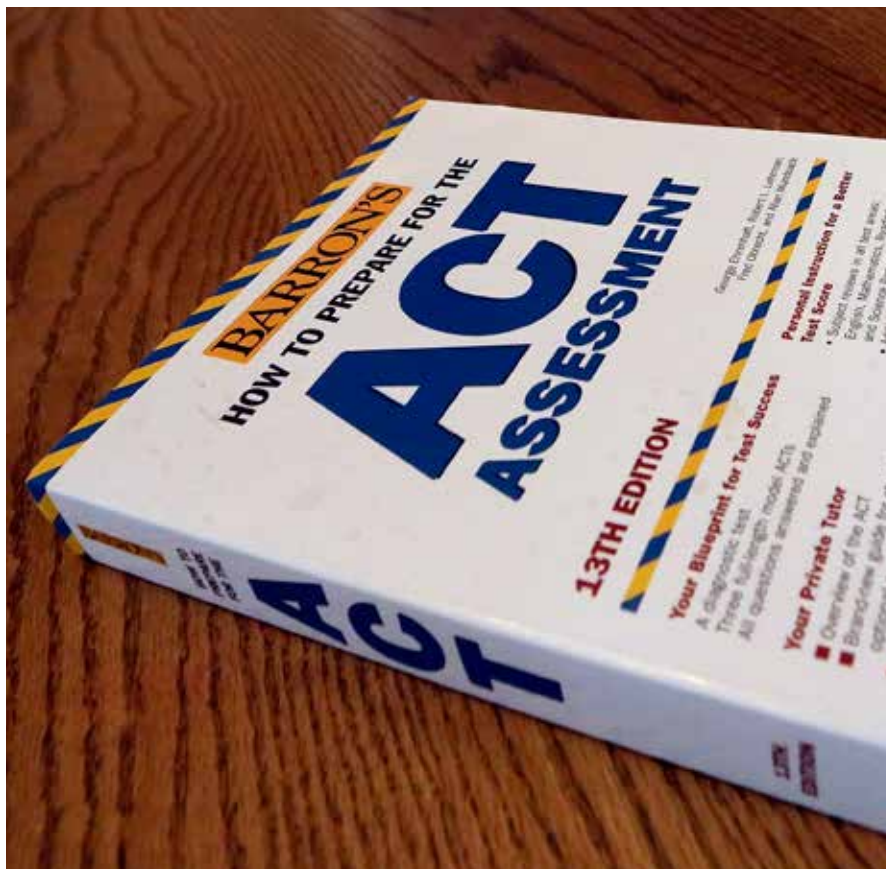
"The hard truth is that we are not doing enough to ensure that graduates are truly ready for postsecondary success in college and career," said Janet Godwin, chief executive officer for the nonprofit ACT.

The average ACT composite score for U.S. students was 19.5 out of 36. Last year, the average score was 19.8.

The average scores in reading, science and math all were below benchmarks the ACT says students must reach to have a high probability of success in first-year college courses. The average score in English was just above the benchmark but still declined compared to last year.

Many universities have made standardized admissions tests optional amid criticism that they favor the wealthy and put low-income students at a disadvantage. Some including the University of California system do not consider ACT or SAT scores even if submitted.

Ms. Godwin said the scores are still helpful for placing students in the right college courses and preparing academic advisors to better support students.



AP/SETH PERLMAN

"In terms of college readiness, even in a test-optional environment, these kinds of objective test scores about academic readiness are incredibly important," Ms. Godwin said.

At Denise Cabrera's high school in Hawaii, all students are required to take the ACT as juniors. She said she would have taken it anyway to improve her chances of getting into college.

"Honestly, I'm unsure why the test was ever required because colleges can look at different qualities of the students who are applying outside of just a one-time test score," said Denise, a 17-year-old senior at Waianae High School.

She is looking at schools including the California Institute of Technology, which implemented a five-year moratorium on the standardized test score

requirements during the pandemic. Denise said she knows the school is not considering scores, but she does not want to limit her options elsewhere.

About 1.4 million students in the U.S. took the ACT this year, an increase from last year. However, the numbers have not returned to pre-pandemic levels. Ms. Godwin said she does not believe those numbers will ever fully recover, partly because of test-optional admission policies.

Of students who were tested, only 21 percent met benchmarks for success in college-level classes in all subjects. Research from the nonprofit shows students who meet those benchmarks have a 50 percent chance of earning a B or better and nearly a 75 percent chance of earning a C or better in corresponding courses. □

Human Rights in Russia Have ‘Significantly Deteriorated’ Since War: UN Expert

Geneva (Reuters) – The human rights situation in Russia has significantly deteriorated since it invaded Ukraine in February last year, a United Nations expert said, describing a “systematic crackdown” on civil society and calling for redress.

The report by Special Rapporteur Mariana Katzarova alleges that Russian authorities have carried out mass arbitrary arrests of critics of the war and says those detained risk death due to the “persistent use of torture and ill-treatment.”

It is the first time the 16-year-old UN Human Rights Council (HRC) has been mandated to examine the record of one of its so-called “P5” members, which hold permanent seats on the Security Council.

Moscow has previously called criticism of its domestic rights record unfounded and denied targeting civilians in Ukraine, where it says it is carrying out a “special military operation” to destroy military infrastructure.

“[The expert] has documented the recent legislative restrictions that are being used to muzzle civil society and punish human rights activists and others for their anti-war stance,” the report said in its conclusions.

“The often-violent enforcement of these laws and regulations has resulted in a systematic crackdown on civil society organizations that has closed civic space and independent media,” it said.

Since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Moscow has passed stronger laws to punish dissenters and perceived traitors. The report says 20,000 people have been detained between February

2022 and June 2023 for taking part in protests and more than 600 criminal lawsuits were opened for so-called “anti-war” activity.

The UN expert Katzarova, a former journalist from Bulgaria who led investigations during the two Chechen wars for Amnesty International, also referred to attempts by Russia to obstruct her mandate, saying such actions showed “a lack of political will

to uphold its human rights obligations.”

Moscow told the expert it did not recognize her work and said it would be automatically disregarded, the report said.

In late October, a UN commission of inquiry said it had found additional evidence that Russian forces had committed “indiscriminate attacks” and war crimes in Ukraine, including rape and the deportation of children to Russia.

The report described Russian “violations of international human rights and international humanitarian law, and corresponding crimes, in areas that came under their control in Ukraine.” □



The United Nations headquarters building is pictured through a window with the UN logo in the foreground in the Manhattan borough of New York (Aug. 15, 2014).

REUTERS/CARLO ALLEGRI



Should You Celebrate Thanksgiving?

For many in North America, the yearly celebration of giving thanks is reduced to gorging on a big meal, excessive drinking the night before, or snoozing in front of a football game. For others, Black Friday—a day of frenzied shopping to capture the best market deals of the year—overshadows the holiday altogether.

Given all of the media hype, excess and sensational commercialism surrounding it, the original meaning of Thanksgiving can easily be

lost for Americans and Canadians. Yet citizens of these prosperous nations should have every reason to keep the day as it was intended.

Although the national holiday was not instituted in the Bible, the scriptures have much to say about thankfulness. The article “Should You Celebrate Thanksgiving Day?” provides historical and biblical insight into this holiday that can help you better appreciate everything you have.

Read the article today at rcg.org/syctd