

FEBRUARY 2015

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A MAGAZINE RESTORING PLAIN UNDERSTANDING



POLITICS, POWER AND THE POPE

The Vatican's Rising Diplomatic Clout

**Why Britain Is
Drowning in Drink!**

The Human Problem
Would the Planet Be Better Off Without Us?

**11 Things You Must Know
About the Islamic State**

Chase Away the
Winter Blues!

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VOL. XIII | NO. 1 | FEBRUARY 2015

A R T I C L E S

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FRONT COVER: People walk around St. Peter's Square in Vatican City.

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HOW THIS MAGAZINE IS PAID FOR:
The Real Truth[™] is made possible by the voluntary, freely given tithes and offerings of the members of The Restored Church of God[®], and by the offerings and donations of co-workers and donors around the world. Contributions are gratefully welcomed and are tax deductible in the U.S. and Canada. Those who wish to voluntarily aid and support the Work of God in preaching and publishing the gospel to all nations are gladly welcomed as co-workers. Contributions may be sent to the following address:

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The preparation and production of this magazine involved the work of editors, proofreaders, graphic artists, illustrators, writers, researchers and those who support the Work of God.

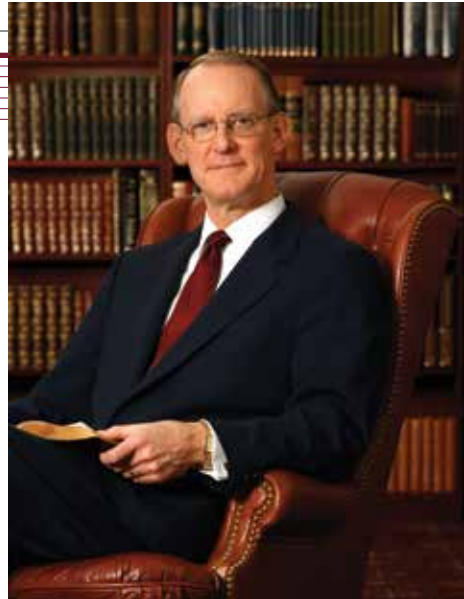
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PERSONAL FROM

David C. Fack



Is a Secret Rapture in the Bible?

MILLIONS BELIEVE in a secret rapture, when Jesus will unexpectedly take Christians to heaven. Is this what the Bible teaches? God *does* promise protection. But where? On Earth—or in heaven? And can we know?

Civilization is on a collision course with unprecedented world trouble. Global problems will soon grow much worse, and culminate in the prophesied Great Tribulation, followed by the Day of the Lord—and concluding with Christ's Return. Horrific prophecies will soon be fulfilled. Great numbers will perish. Some will be spared—but who?

The masses are blissfully unaware of—and therefore UNPREPARED for—*any* of what is coming. This includes most who think they are. You can be an exception!

What does God expect of His servants? All who care had better know.

Coming Rapture?

According to fundamentalist Christians, a rapture is coming. "Believers"—those who have "accepted Jesus"—are scheduled to be whisked away without notice—no matter where they are or what they are doing. All "unbelievers" will be left behind to suffer under the antichrist, and through the supposed seven-year Tribulation—when war,

disease, famine and religious deception explode worldwide. These missed being "vacuumed" to the safety of heaven at Christ's secret coming. The antichrist will permit the Jews to build another temple in Jerusalem, which he will attack and destroy three and a half years later.

Recognize there are two major competing positions among rapturists. It occurs *before*, or in the *middle of*, the seven years. But the sudden disappearance of millions, it is said, will "shock the world." After the Tribulation, Christ returns—this being His *visible*, and, in effect, **THIRD**, coming—and defeats the antichrist and his army.

This future worldwide vanishing act has generated movies, books and even board games about its aftermath! One group created a "Rapture Index" it terms a "Dow Jones Industrial Average of end-time activity" and a "prophetic speedometer." Supposedly, by calculating world conditions, the index closely forecasts Christ's Return. "The higher the number," the group's website states, "the faster we're moving towards the occurrence of pre-tribulation rapture."

Another group has prepared a "post-rapture" email to automatically be sent to family and friends. It states in part, "Dear Friend, This message has been sent...by a friend or a relative who has recently disappeared along with millions of people around the world. They chose

to send this letter because they cared about you and would like you to know the truth [of] where they went. This may come as a shock, but the one who sent you this has been taken to heaven...there will be a lot of speculation as to what happened to [everyone]. The theories of some scientists and world leaders will have so much credibility that most of the world will believe them. It will sound like the truth!”

Have *you* accepted the rapture, because it also “sounds like the truth”? Great numbers of sincere people have been captured by this idea! Have *you* placed *your* hope in this belief without Bible proof?

Much is at stake. In fact, your life depends on it!

So then, we ask: will Christ come one or two more times?

History of the Idea

While many believe a rapture has always been the Bible teaching, the idea was *unknown* before the 16th century.

Some important history: During the 15th and 16th centuries, reformers John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, Martin Luther, and John Huss campaigned against the dominance of the Catholic Church. These men shook Catholic theology to its core—even calling that church the antichrist! Previously, Rome would have forced its beliefs and traditions on those who disagreed. However, support for the reformers quickly mounted. This publicly undermined Catholic authority.

Rome called for reconciliation, and convened the Council of Trent in 1545. From this council sprang the “counter-reformation” teachings of three Jesuit priests—Francisco Ribera, Luis de Alcazar, and Cardinal Bellarmine.

Ribera followed with a commentary on the book of Revelation. To dispel the church’s label of antichrist, he created the belief of *futurism*. This declared that the prophecies of Revelation *only* applied to the last seven years preceding Christ’s Return!

Recognize that the Catholic Church openly admits it creates beliefs—as

well as traditions—entirely apart from the Bible. This is why Ribera could invent a *completely non-biblical* theory. Notice: “A rule of Faith, or a competent guide to heaven, must be able to instruct in all the truths necessary for salvation. Now the Scriptures alone do not contain all the truths which a Christian is bound to believe, nor do they explicitly enjoin all the duties which he is obliged to practise...” (*Faith of Our Fathers*, James Gibbons).

Catholic leaders make no attempt to hide their belief that tradition outweighs Scripture. In fact, this has become its own tradition. Yet most are unaware of this. The Council of Trent gave *tradition*—in this case, the humanly invented futurism—equal authority to the Bible.

It was Ribera’s idea that opened the door to the rapture theory.

Here comes the irony. Almost 300 years later, Protestants adopted Ribera’s “futurism” invention. Thanks to the Catholics, John Nelson Darby, the Anglican preacher who is called the “father of the rapture,” could pick up where Ribera left off with his own invention—*dispensationalism*. Unlike any need the Catholics felt, Protestants—in this case, Darby—needed a way to get the Bible to say what they wanted to believe about a rapture. His way of interpreting the Bible taught that Christ would first *secretly* collect His followers and later return to defeat the antichrist. This teaching continued through Darby’s disciple, Cyrus Scofield, who assembled the *Scofield Reference Bible*.

John A. Anderson records more history of what was originally “counter-Protestantism”: “The Catholic Apostolic Church had its beginning in 1830. It was founded in Britain by... men and women who claimed divine inspiration. They said the Holy Spirit revealed to them that the last days had come [this proved false], that the Lord was about to return [also false], that first He would rapture the believers... at a secret coming...after which Christ would come in manifested power” (*Heralds of the Dawn*).

Countless millions have blindly accepted the rapture theory—fearing what would happen if they did not. But grasp this. The doctrine began in the minds of Catholic priests, then continued development in the minds of the reformers—not GOD’S mind, as revealed in the Bible! The Protestants simply bought in and picked up later.

Now think. Disagreeing theologians—remember rapture theorists do not agree—found different ways of interpreting the Bible to present the rapture. Which should one listen to? The answer? None—because the belief is not in the Bible. Inventingologies such as futurism or dispensationalism will not unlock God’s Word! By letting the Bible interpret itself—the greatest rule of Bible study—one can understand all the events surrounding the Tribulation and Christ’s Second Coming.

What Will Really Happen?

So let’s understand. Matthew 24 is a prophecy describing the end-time events preceding Christ’s Return. Jesus describes a period when society becomes “as the days of Noah were” (vs. 37). That time was “filled with violence” (Gen. 6:11), yet people were going about their daily business, pursuing pleasure and gain. This is when disaster fell on them.

People are again foretold to be so immersed in their lives that the Tribulation will take the world by surprise. Jesus warned, “For *as a snare* shall it come on all them that dwell on the face of the whole earth” (Luke 21:35). Solomon added, “For man also knows not his time: as the fishes that are taken in an evil net, and as the birds that are *caught in the snare*; so are the sons of men snared in an evil time [in this case, the end-time], when it falls suddenly upon them” (Ecc. 9:12).

However, the Bible also warns, “There shall come in the last days scoffers...saying, Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers [the patriarchs] fell asleep, *all things continue as they were* from...creation”

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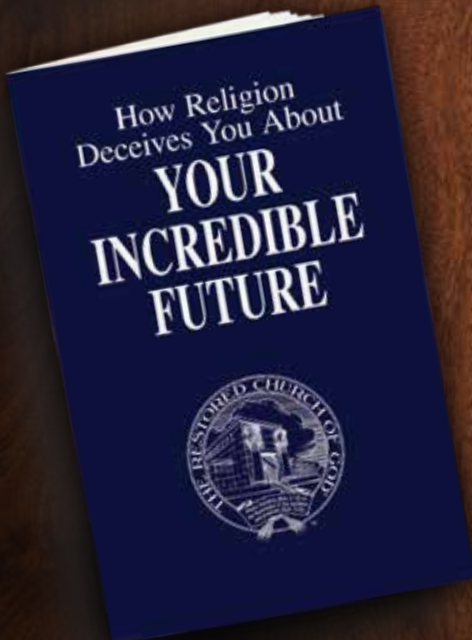


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WHY BRITAIN IS *Drowning in Drink!*

The nation's reputation as the “drunk man of Europe” precedes Britons wherever they go. The truth behind this nickname reveals a lot about the nation.

BY ROBERT R. FARRELL
EUROPEAN CORRESPONDENT

LONDON HOLDS a special place in my heart. I previously lived there and now reside an hour outside the city. In all this time, it has never lost its charm.

The best way to experience the over 1,900-year-old city is on foot. Walking allows you to see little details that would be missed by taking a red double-decker bus or the Tube, the world's oldest subway.

A morning jaunt through the city's narrow side streets—often draped in dense fog—provides views of rows and rows of identical Victorian-style terraced houses seemingly snatched from a Charles Dickens novel. The structures are a reminder of the nation's leading role in the Industrial Age.

A rush-hour trek downtown to Piccadilly Circus surrounds you in a sea of commuters often clutching bro-lies (umbrellas, for Americans) and wearing mackintoshes and other rain-coats—all prepared for Britain's notoriously unpredictable weather.

Throughout London, both history and modernity are on display. Centuries-old buildings stand erect next to 20th-century architecture. The former survived the rigorous German bombing raids during WWII and still have markings on their walls where shrapnel grazed them. Remembering Britons of that time is how I still consider them today: a resilient people, with steely resolve when needed.

But there are many other sites to see: an afternoon stroll in The Regent's Park reveals elegant, well-manicured gardens. An outing at the Portobello Road Market shows off the city's global appeal, while also harkening back to the time British colonies spanned the entire globe. A walking tour of Buckingham Palace or Big Ben and the Parliament Building demonstrate a rich history of its regal monarchy and one of the longest-running democracies in the world, respectively.

Wherever you travel throughout London, one thing is abundantly clear: Britons are an immensely capable people—both historically and today.

Yet any evidence of these positive qualities disappears at night, replaced by acts of lewdness and brash behavior. *Associated Press* article “Britain Bedeviled by Binge Drinking” described a typical nighttime scene: “The girls slumped in wheelchairs look barely conscious, their blond heads lolling above the plastic vomit bags tied like bibs around their necks. It's an hour to midnight on Friday, and the two girls, who look no older than 18, are being wheeled from an ambulance to a clinic...They're the first of many to be picked up on this night by the ambulance, known as a ‘booze bus,’ and carried to the clinic—both government services dedicated to keeping drunk people out of trouble, and out of emergency rooms.”

The article continued: “On the streets of Soho [London's entertainment district], most people are too busy drinking to notice passed-out partyers. The streets, lined with pubs and night-clubs, are just beginning to get rowdy: Men chasing each other and shrieking like teenagers; women stumbling and falling over in their too-short skirts and

high heels. Soon the sidewalks are littered with empty beer bottles and reeking puddles.”

Similar scenes regularly play out in cities across Britain. Orderly and serene by day, they are transformed into places of drunken debauchery at night.

Worse still, Britain has exported its reputation to the world. It is the “drunk man of Europe,” with public inebriation worn as a badge of honor. A visiting student from Finland noticed the stark difference from his country: “[At home] it’s embarrassing to be drunk. Here it’s kind of something you brag about” (AP).

For many who call this great nation home, such a reputation is hard to stomach. Yet Britons continue to live up to their notorious image as seen in continuous newspaper spreads, television reports, and Internet articles.

Why has such an immensely capable people turned their nation into the drunk man of Europe?

Culturally Ingrained

Leading healthcare provider Bupa reported that up to a quarter of Britons are binge drinkers, which means they quickly consume excessive amounts of alcohol to become heavily intoxicated.

Yet it is not just a problem for those who go on one-night benders or rampages—it is a blight for the entire nation. The *BBC* reported that close to a third of men and a fifth of women drink at least twice the recommended daily limit. Also, over 80 percent of adults do not even keep track of how much they drink when they go out. Bupa reported that an astonishing 11 million Britons—just under one in five—are tragically endangering their health in this manner.

The problem is so ingrained in society that Debrett’s, a British social etiquette organization, has an entire entry devoted to drunkenness. It states: “Despite their reputation for reticence and reserve, British people love to drink. Alcohol oils the wheels of British social life... For many people, alcohol is an effective de-inhibitor, a failsafe way of breaking down social barriers and bringing people closer together. But the [soothing] effects of alcohol can eas-

ily tip into drunkenness, as the rowdy Saturday-night streets of many British towns will testify.”

There it is: “British people love to drink.” Overindulging is not some hidden problem, or one only among those who are younger—it affects every strata of UK culture. The detailed Debrett’s entry goes on to say that drunkenness is unattractive and gives specific details about how to handle someone who has imbibed too much.

For the nation, *this* is the type of protocol advice on par with the difference between “black tie” and “white tie” events and how to format your engagement announcement for the newspaper.

By comparison, the Emily Post Institute, Debrett’s American counterpart, has no similar entry on its website.

“Britain has exported its reputation to the world. It is the ‘drunk man of Europe,’ with public inebriation worn as a badge of honor.”

And it is not about to get any better. *The Wall Street Journal* reported that between 1980 and 2007, while per capita alcohol consumption in 30 Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development countries fell by 13 percent, Britain’s *rose* by 19 percent. The newspaper noted that average consumption in several major Western nations fell significantly during this period: 33 percent in France, 30 percent in Germany, 17 percent in the U.S., and 24 percent in Canada.

Other countries, on average do drink more than Britons, but they do not have as much of a reputation for being sloppy drunks.

How much have things changed for the UK? Alastair Campbell, who was

the director of communications and strategy while Tony Blair was prime minister, recounted his experiences as a former heavy drinker in an article for *ITV News*: “When I had a drink problem I felt like I was in the minority going out and getting smashed night after night. In Britain today, it is the non-drinker who feels in the minority. You never have to explain why you are drinking whereas you always have to explain why you are not.”

Societal Scourge

As much of the rest of the world continues to curb their drinking, Britain stands out. It refuses to give up the bottle despite the obvious plague of problems alcohol brings the nation.

While reading the many negative effects for the UK, consider *WHY* this trend continues to worsen.

In the workplace, up to 17 million working days are lost annually because of alcohol-related sicknesses, with the cost of sick days alone to employers assessed around £1.7 billion (\$2.6 billion). It has been estimated that loss of productivity to the economy from excessive use of alcohol is somewhere between a staggering £20 billion (\$30 billion) and £55 billion (\$83 billion) (*The Independent*).

The nation’s overall health is suffering also. The UK charity group Alcohol Concern said that in 2012-2013, there were over one million alcohol-related admissions to the hospital in England.

Additionally, liver disease is the only major cause of death in Britain that is rising, with deaths from cirrhosis up fivefold since 1970. In other European countries, it is significantly decreasing.

“In the last decade there has been a 63% increase in prescriptions for the treatment of alcohol dependency in England, as well as a 20% rise in deaths from liver disease,” *BBC* reported.

The National Health Service (NHS) and hospitals across the country are stretched to the limit in dealing with the problem.

Several years ago on the Friday before Christmas, some ambulance

services received emergency calls as frequently as every 30 seconds to deal with drunk and injured revelers.

Booze-fueled crime and violence is another major issue. A representative from the Association of Chief Police Officers told *The New York Times* that “50 percent of all violent crime in Britain was alcohol-related, and that alcohol was involved in 73 percent of all domestic violence and 25 percent of child abuse cases.”

As many as 2.6 million children are living with a problem drinker, according to Alcohol Concern.

To sum up the nation’s dire situation, almost one-quarter of all Britons experience “drunk or rowdy behavior” in their communities, according to *The Independent*.

Descent into Drunkenness

Britons’ love of the bottle has given them a notorious reputation in Europe as drunkards. This is made clear by the constant articles addressing the subject:

■ “Some Britons Too Unruly for Resorts in Europe” (*The New York Times*)

■ “Drunk, Overweight and Sunburnt: What the Germans

Think of Holidaying Britons” (*The Telegraph*)

■ “World’s Worst Tourists? British Take the Crown Hands Down” (*The Huffington Post*)

The trend has gotten to the point that popular tourist spots are looking for ways to curb problems caused by “boozy Brits.”

In December 2014, Magaluf, a popular holiday resort in Spain, announced a decision to ban “pub crawls” in an attempt to restore its image to “a mature tourist zone,” British tabloid *Daily Mail* reported. Lawmakers were spurred to action after a shocking video emerged showing an 18-year-old UK girl performing sex acts on 24 men—in exchange for a free drink.

Magaluf is not alone. Many European cities, holiday resorts, and football stadiums are uncomfortable hosts to British visitors, having long suffered their destructive behavior.

How things have changed over the last few decades!

Not long ago, Britons were most known for being reserved and self-effacing by nature. They were a model of self-control—able to maintain a

stiff upper lip even in the most difficult circumstances. The adages “keep calm and carry on” and “manners maketh the man” were regarded as sacrosanct—men or women were not considered mature unless they had a sense of decorum.

For hundreds of years, getting wasted on alcohol was not something of which to be proud—it was seen as a lack of self-control that only “ne’er-do-wells” would have. A cultured person kept his mind and reputation intact at all times.

What is behind this sudden shift? Why did the British quickly go from decent and dignified to drunk and disorderly?

The place to look is a part of UK history that most would rather forget: the British Empire.

From around 1800 until about 1950, the British had the greatest empire of all time. This historical fact drives national thinking to a much greater degree than most are aware.

As with any manmade governmental system, there were some negative aspects to the empire. But consider the many positives brought by British rule: they opened up the world to



■ **INFAMOUS REPUTATION:** Left, tourists enjoy the atmosphere of a local bar in the town of Magaluf on the Spanish island of Mallorca (July 12, 2014). Right, a woman takes a swig of whiskey to celebrate the Winter Solstice at Castlerigg Stone Circle in Keswick, England (Dec. 21, 2014).

PHOTO: DAVID RAMOS/GETTY IMAGES (LEFT); IAN FORSYTH/GETTY IMAGES (RIGHT)

share resources, ideas and culture. In this way, they laid the groundwork for modern globalization.

In addition, they often improved the natural beauty of their colonies by planting elegant gardens. Missionaries with a sincere desire to better the world spread the King James Bible throughout the globe.

The British Empire had a meteoric rise to a truly awesome peak: it held one-fifth of the world's landmass and ruled a quarter of mankind. Also, it controlled many of the globe's sea gates including the Suez Canal, the Straits of Hormuz, the Cape of Good Hope, Singapore, the Straits of Gibraltar, Malta and Hong Kong.

All this in about 100 years!

Yet its downfall from this position was just as swift. Starting in earnest after World War II, the empire's colonies were cut loose one by one until 1966, when the British Colonial Office closed its doors for good. Societal decorum has plummeted just as fast, and today continues to worsen—best seen in its alcohol epidemic.

Think. A nation rocketing to position as a global power, then an equally quick downfall. There is nothing in

their history that suggests they would do so.

Or is there?

The answer lies in the world's most widely distributed but least understood book. It is the same text British missionaries carried with them around the globe, yet never fully understood.

Yes, Britain is mentioned in the Bible—and in detail!

Vital Key

To understand where the UK is mentioned in the Bible, however, one must first understand a vital key in Scripture. Millennia ago, God made a promise to His servant Abraham because of the patriarch's obedience. He and his descendants were foretold by God to “grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth” (Gen. 48:16).

This covenant has had a profound impact on world history. God later expounded upon it by saying that Abraham's descendants would become both “a *nation* and a *company of nations...*” (35:10-12).

The promise was passed on to the patriarch's great-great grandchildren Manasseh and Ephraim. Manasseh was to “become a people, and he also shall

be great: but truly his younger brother [Ephraim] shall be greater than he, and his seed shall become a *multitude of nations*” (48:19).

In other words, Manasseh's descendants would become a GREAT NATION and Ephraim's a COMPANY OF NATIONS.

Looking over the annals of time, there has been only one pair of brother nations that has achieved this: America (the great nation) and Britain (the company of nations). They are the only peoples that fit the criteria.

Knowing the modern identity of Ephraim opens up crucial biblical understanding regarding Great Britain today.

In fact, God's Word bluntly describes the condition the UK is in today: “Woe to the crown of pride, to the DRUNKARDS OF EPHRAIM, whose glorious beauty is a fading flower, which are on the head of the fat valleys of them that are overcome with wine!” (Isa. 28:1).

With its empire gone, Britain's “crown of pride” has become drunkenness. The “glorious beauty” of its empire is truly a “fading flower.”

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■ **BRITONS ABROAD:** Supporters of England's World Cup team cheer while watching a soccer match at an English pub in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (June 19, 2014).

PHOTO: MARIO TAMA/GETTY IMAGES

11 Things You Must Know About the

ISLAMIC STATE



After suddenly emerging in 2014, the Islamic State quickly demonstrated that it is in a class of its own among terror groups. The organization appears to be here to stay.

BY JUSTIN T. PALM

DID JUNE 29, 2014, mark the birth of the world's newest country—the Islamic State? Should the tally of 196 nations be updated? Not since South Sudan in July 2011 has a new nation-state been born.

There are some differences though. While the international community quickly recognized the African nation, the rise of the Islamic State (ISIS or IS) is more problematic. No nation would jump to recognize the formation of a brutal, self-declared Islamic caliphate.

At first, the proclamation of a re-established caliphate by its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi seemed audacious. But as more is learned about IS, this announcement is increasingly being taken seriously.

Far from a ragtag band of medieval, unsophisticated marauders, IS is wealthy, tightly organized, and highly motivated—and their goal is global domination.

The rapid expansion of ISIS caught the world completely by surprise. In 2014, the little-known terrorist organization swept across huge sections of Syria and Iraq, establishing a capital in Raqqa, Syria. This relatively new

group rose to power with stunning speed and efficiency. The following quote from the *BBC* summarizes the history of the Islamic State. Its inception sprang from disagreements within al-Qaida.

“IS can trace its roots back to the late Abu Musab al-Zarqawi...A year after the US-led invasion of Iraq, Zarqawi pledged allegiance to Osama Bin Laden and formed al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), which became a major force in the insurgency.

“After Zarqawi’s death in 2006, AQI created an umbrella organisation, Islamic State in Iraq (ISI). ISI was steadily weakened by the US troop

■ **MARKING TERRITORY:** An Islamic State flag waves along the road between Kirkuk and Tikrit, Iraq. The area is at the frontline of fighting between Kurdish Peshmerga fighters and Islamist militants (Sept. 11, 2014).

PHOTO: JM LOPEZ/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

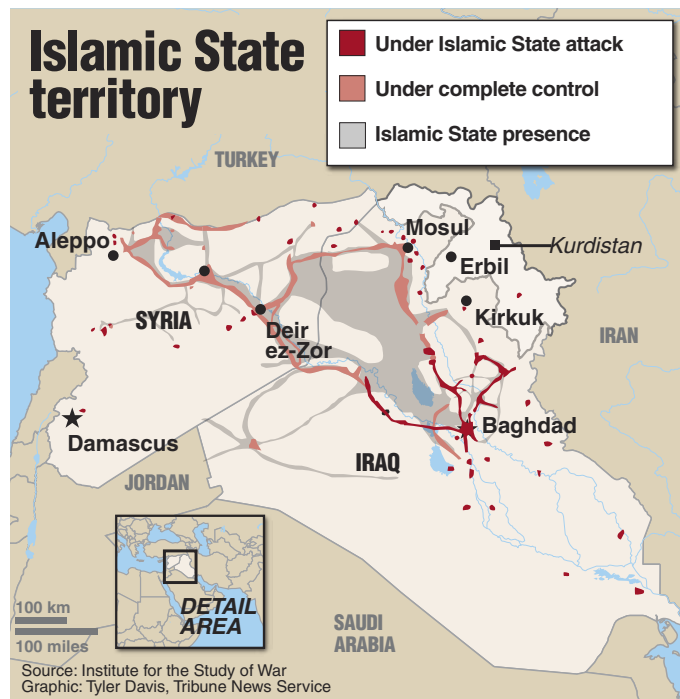
surge...After becoming leader in 2010, Baghdadi rebuilt ISI's capabilities. By 2013, it was once again carrying out dozens of attacks a month in Iraq. It had also joined the rebellion against President Bashar al-Assad in Syria, setting up the al-Nusra Front. In April 2013, Baghdadi announced the merger of his forces in Iraq and Syria and the creation of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Isis). The leaders of al-Nusra and al-Qaeda rejected the move, but fighters loyal to Baghdadi split from al-Nusra and helped Isis remain in Syria."

The Islamic State is made up of radical *Sunni* Muslims (the majority of Muslims worldwide are Sunni, not Shia). Shias are seen by IS as heretics and are slaughtered alongside Christians. ISIS extremists view themselves as "pure" Muslims—ones who will usher in a new era of Islamic rule.

Islamic Sharia law is enforced by ISIS by the edge of the sword or the barrel of a gun. Sharia is a code of conduct based on the strictest interpretation of the Muslim holy book, the Koran. Citizens live in constant fear of arrest or whippings for acts like public smoking, drinking alcohol, or swearing. Thieves' hands are chopped off. The penalty for drug abuse is death. Murderers are crucified. Severed heads are mounted in public squares in Raqqa and other captured cities to send a message to all. Captured women are sold as sex slaves in marketplaces. One IS fighter slaughtered 150 women, some of whom were pregnant, simply because they refused to become sex slaves. Even little boys and girls labeled "infidel children" are being beheaded.

After horrific videos were released in late summer of the beheadings of Western journalists, world leaders took note of and strongly condemned IS: "President Obama called the murder of

[a British aid worker] 'barbaric'...The commander-in-chief pledged again to 'degrade and destroy' the terrorist organization. Australian officials, responding to a request by the U.S., said... they will send 600 troops...to a global coalition fighting ISIS...Australia's Prime Minister Tony Abbott said it was Haines' beheading that compelled Australia to act. British Prime Minister David Cameron has also promised to 'hunt down those responsible and bring them to justice no matter how long it takes'" (MSNBC).



The first Western journalist granted unprecedented access to ISIS returned with the following observations including a warning not to underestimate their capability: "I think the Islamic State is a lot more dangerous than Western leaders realize. They believe in what they are fighting for and are preparing the largest religious cleansing campaign the world has ever seen."

"He told CNN: 'These are not stupid people. One of the people we met had just finished his law degree. He had great job offers, but he turned them down to go and fight... We met fighters from Europe and the United States...'" (Newsweek).

Most watching can hardly believe what they are seeing. But the full picture is even worse than most realize. The following are 11 things the reader must know about the Islamic State.

(1) It Controls Vast Territory

The Islamic State controls a huge territory across eastern Syria and northern Iraq—up to 35,000 square miles! The following quote from *The Atlantic* shows the many ways to look at the area under IS control: "ISIS territory in Iraq and Syria tends to be described as 'swaths.' The estimated size of these swaths...varies widely in reports, from 12,000 square miles—'an area the size of Belgium,' per *The Wall Street Journal*—to 35,000 square miles, or 'an area the size of Jordan,' as George Packer wrote...in *The New Yorker*. Whatever else the caliphate is, by these estimates of territorial size at least, it's starting to look more and more like a state.

"Packer continued: 'The self-proclaimed caliphate stretches from the newly conquered towns along the Syrian-Turkish border, through its de-facto capital of Raqqa, in northern Syria, across the obliterated Iraqi border into Mosul, Tikrit,

and Falluja, down to the farming towns south of Baghdad—roughly a third of the territory of both [Iraq and Syria].'"

ISIS has even made their presence felt in villages and towns not directly within their reach, according to the article.

"Bill Roggio of *The Long War Journal*, which is also tracking the spread of ISIS, writes in an email that ISIS influence can be felt even in [the] deserts...'Iraqis in the small hamlets and villages not directly under Islamic State control know who are truly in control,' he says. 'Think of it like this: Americans living in the remotest areas of Alaska often see little to no government involvement, but ultimately they

know the U.S. government can assert itself if it needed to.”

(2) It Is Organized Like a Fortune 500 Company

Most do not realize that ISIS is run like a corporation. Computer equipment confiscated in 2007 revealed that their internal management was *highly* structured, even at that early time.

“It may sound bizarre for a group calling itself a caliphate, but the foundation of its management model, as identified by experts, is more akin to that of General Motors than it is to a religious dynasty from the Dark Ages,” a comprehensive *Businessweek* article described. “After decades, we may have arrived at the ultimate professionalization of terror...”

“...During a routine January 2007 patrol in Anbar province...a unit of U.S. Marines stumbled on a cache of nine documents in a roadside ditch. They included financial records, payrolls, supply purchase records, administrative records, and other details of fund flows into and out of a single local cell in Anbar of a group then calling itself the ‘Islamic State of Iraq’...”

“Taken together, the Anbar records allowed for a forensic reconstruction of the back-office operations of a terrorist insurgency from its local level up to its divisional headquarters. The data were handed over to the National Defense Research Institute of Rand Corp., a U.S. Department of Defense-funded think tank based in Santa Monica, Calif...What they concluded in a 2010 report, written for then-Defense Secretary Robert Gates, should be familiar to students of business management: The group was decentralized, organized, and run on what’s called the ‘multidivisional-hierarchy form’ of management, or M-form for short...It’s the structure that started taking root in the corporate world in the 1920s, thanks to Alfred Sloan’s decision to reorganize General Motors...”

According to experts studying the inner-workings of the terrorist organization, the “Islamic State of Iraq was

set up along the lines of the best multinationals...” (ibid.).

(3) It Is Run by Experienced Military Commanders

Businessweek also revealed that al-Baghdadi spent a significant amount of time filling the ranks with top military commanders—intelligent, experienced, strategic thinkers.

“Well before [al-Baghdadi] started his march across the region over the summer [2014], he spent an entire year gathering hundreds of experienced personnel, including veteran leaders. Mostly, he broke them out of cell blocks in prisons across Iraq. Many were on death row.”

“In September 2012, an Islamic State suicide car bomber struck the front gate of Tasfirat Prison in Tikrit, the hometown of Saddam Hussein... About 100 inmates were freed, including senior members of the organization, according to press reports at the time.

“It was the first major operation in what al-Baghdadi publicly unveiled in July 2012 as the ‘Destroying the Walls’ campaign. His aim was to spend a year freeing the group’s leaders and fighters from Iraq’s prisons to ‘refuel’ operations; many of those he would free had been imprisoned by U.S. forces during the occupation of Iraq.”

Two more major prison breaks took place on July 21, 2013, at Baghdad’s Taji and Abu Ghraib prisons. Around 1,000 inmates were freed, many of whom ended up in senior IS positions: “It’s hard to know exactly which former inmates ended up in what positions, but Iraqi officials and supporters of Islamic State alike said at the time that senior leaders and regional commanders were among those sprung. Supporters took to social media to declare it the most important jihadi operation since Sept. 11, given the personnel who escaped” (ibid.).

Mr. Baghdadi’s “Destroying the Walls” campaign appeared to just be Phase 1 of his overall plan. Once Phase 1 was complete, IS swept across huge sections of Iraq and Syria, win-

ning battles in cities no one expected them to take. These territorial gains brought with them captured military hardware. In August 2014, *Reuters* reported that IS “captured an enormous amount of U.S. weaponry, originally intended for the rebuilt Iraqi Army... including M1 Abrams tanks (about \$6 million each), 52 M198 Howitzer cannons (\$527,337), and MRAPs [vehicles designed to withstand explosive devices] (about \$1 million)...”

Although estimates of the Islamic State’s army vary widely, one top official stated that the number of men could be well into six-figures, *The Independent* reported: “The Islamic State (Isis) has recruited an army hundreds of thousands strong, far larger than previous estimates by the CIA, according to a senior Kurdish leader. He said the ability of Isis to attack on many widely separated fronts in Iraq and Syria at the same time shows that the number of militant fighters is at least 200,000, seven or eight times bigger than foreign intelligence estimates of up to 31,500 men.

“Fuad Hussein, the chief of staff of the Kurdish President Massoud Barzani said in an exclusive interview with *The Independent* on Sunday that ‘I am talking about hundreds of thousands of fighters because they are able to mobilise Arab young men in the territory they have taken.’

“He estimates that Isis rules a third of Iraq and a third of Syria with a population of between 10 and 12 million living in an area of 250,000 square kilometres, the same size as Great Britain. This gives the jihadis a large pool of potential recruits.”

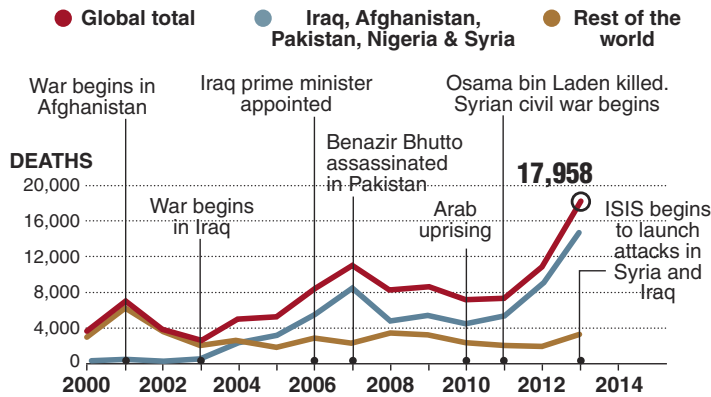
(4) It Is Rich

IS is the wealthiest terrorist organization in history. Even before seizing Mosul, IS quietly built up a sophisticated economy of plunder and smuggling—pulling in an estimated \$12 million per month.

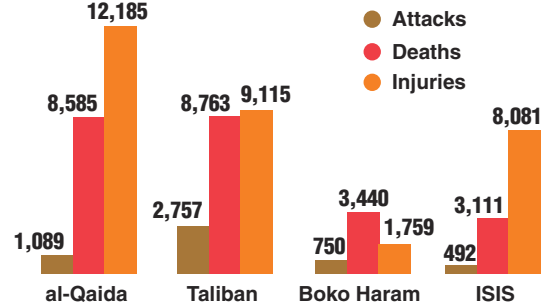
But this was just the start. In mid-2014, when the Islamic State captured Iraq’s second-largest city, Mosul, they raided banks, stealing \$425 million from the city’s central bank.

Terrorism on the Rise

According to a study by The Institute for Economics and Peace, 17,958 people were killed in terrorist attacks in 2013. That is 61 percent more than the previous year. The number of countries that experienced 50 or more deaths as a result of terrorism also increased by 60 percent since 2013. Since 2000, there have been more than 48,000 terrorist attacks that have killed more than 107,000 people.

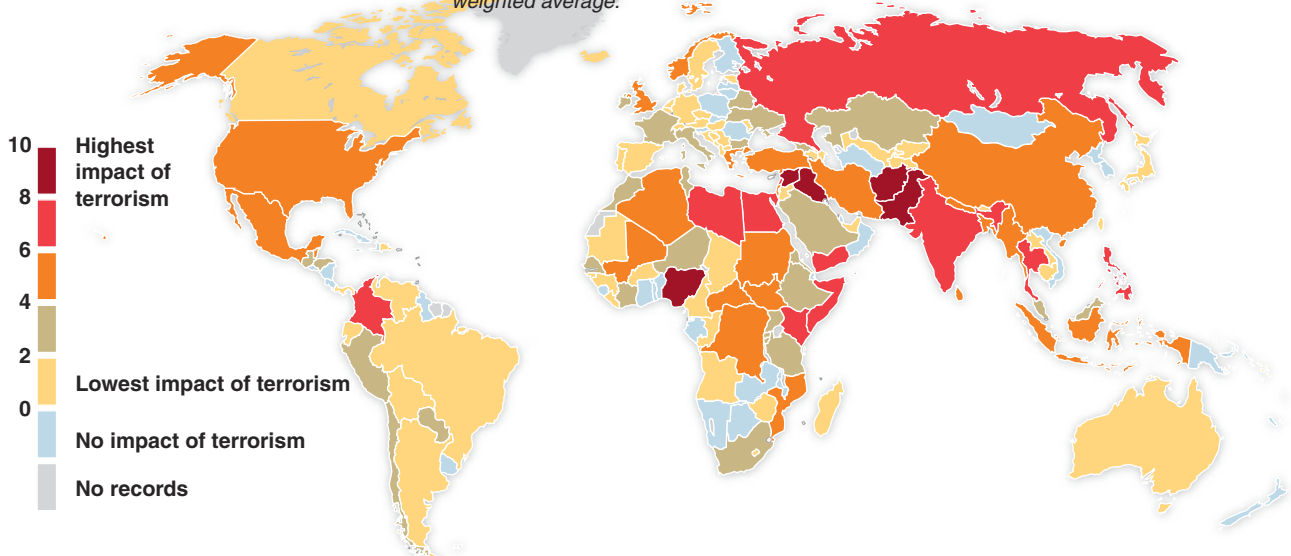


Groups responsible for the majority of fatalities 2000-2013



Global Terrorism Index

The GTI measures the impact of terrorism in 162 countries. To account for the lasting effects of terrorism, each country is given a score from 0-10 that represents a five-year weighted average.



Source: The Institute for Economics and Peace, Vision of Humanity
Graphic: Greg Good, Tribune News Service

Al Arabiya News reported that vast quantities of money and gold were plundered: “Atheel al-Nujaiifi, mayor of Mosul and governor of Nineveh province, said at the time that ISIS had also stolen millions from numerous banks across the city, as well as large quantities of gold bullion.”

The Islamic State also captured main highways, waterways, dams, and most important, oil fields. As of this writing, the group is making over \$3 million *per day* selling oil on the black market, extorting money from people and peddling stolen goods such

as vehicles, tractors and even humans (many times as sex slaves). The group is also reportedly harvesting and selling human organs from those they capture.

All of this cash is maintained according to strict financial principles. During one of the raids described in the *Businessweek* article, a “seized hard drive containing 1,200 files was especially valuable. It appeared to belong to the man who was akin to Islamic State of Iraq’s divisional auditor. The group maintained strict accounting procedures...”

The Islamic State is so far not in danger of running out of cash any time soon. Their net worth is said to be \$2 billion.

(5) It Thinks Long-term

After IS captured Mosul, many feared they would expand south to Baghdad. Yet they stopped short.

Why? It could be because of their patience and careful, step-by-step implementation of a *long-term* strategy. The Islamic State may not want to expand too quickly. They seem to be employing principles to avoid the

fate of companies that go bankrupt after growing too fast, or countries that lose wars because of fighting on too many fronts.

Another example of this patient mentality is Mr. Baghdadi's year-long campaign to swell its ranks with released prisoners. Once enough fighters and leaders were in place, they were able to rapidly capture giant sections of Iraq and Syria.

IS appears to be regrouping and solidifying its reign of terror, ensuring it has a firm grip on its current resource-rich territory before it starts to expand once again. But how soon before they attack Baghdad? And if they do, will the world intervene in a larger way?

(6) It Portrays Itself as a Benefit to Society

What is life like for those in this new "country"? ISIS rules by fear, but they are also establishing themselves as a government that "cares for the people." Unmarked aid stolen from relief organizations is distributed under the "generous" banner of IS. Social welfare programs exist in IS-controlled cities, including the redistribution of wealth. Money from wealthy citizens is divvied among the poor. Crumbling infrastructure, such as bridges and roads, is being repaired. Consumer protection agencies are even being set up. Fair trade and price controls at marketplaces are enforced by patrolling officers known as the *Hisbah*, who also police people's diets, dress and conduct—all according to strict Sharia. They even have a court system, of course based on Islamic law. All of this serves to reinforce the belief in its citizenry that ISIS is "for the people."

The Islamic State uses slick propaganda, showing happy Muslim families in captured cities, supposedly living the "dream life" in a caliphate. Muslim preachers travel through IS-controlled territory, handing out pamphlets to indoctrinate children and young men about the caliphate.

A documentary produced by *Vice News*—one of the only media outlets to feature on-the-ground reporting

about ISIS—interviewed one man who described part of the terror group's strategy: "We established a nursery to teach the Quran and religion to young children. To teach them how to become, one day, leaders who rule the world and lead Muslims on the path of Sharia..."

The group is also skilled in the use of social media—posting videos and photographs of massacres and beheadings on Twitter and Facebook. The infamous beheadings of two American journalists and a British aid worker were produced in high-definition video. This social media campaign is not just designed to strike fear into the world. It is meant to inspire Muslims around the world to join their ranks.

So far, this tactic appears to be working.

(7) Its Ideology Attracts Thousands of Foreign Recruits

The Islamic State believes in their cause. They feel led by a "higher purpose." This cult-like mindset has inspired thousands of Muslims around the world to join under their banner. Their religious fervor has been a rallying cry that has become contagious, infecting people around the world.

A report from *CNN* showed that young men, disillusioned with Western society, are flocking to the

extremist organization: "For a group of radical anti-Western militants, ISIS is pretty good at luring Westerners to its ranks. The latest is an American teen from suburban Chicago who was allegedly on his way to join ISIS. Mohammed Hamzah Khan was stopped just before he was supposed to board a plane to Turkey, authorities said. But he's far from alone..."

"About 2,000 Westerners have gone to fight in Syria, though it was not clear how many joined ISIS...and how many joined moderate opposition groups battling the Syrian government, a CIA source told *CNN* last month. But it's the extremist groups like ISIS that attract the most foreign fighters, [Richard Barrett of the strategic security intelligence company The Soufan Group] wrote.

"They tend to be more inclusive, better organized and better financed than their more moderate counterparts," he said. "They also tend to be more assertive and have more of an impact on the battlefield, and so enjoy greater local standing, which makes them still more attractive to foreign fighters looking to make their own impact."

"UK authorities believe at least 500 British citizens have gone to Iraq and Syria, many of them to



■ **DESTRUCTION:** Smoke rises during an attack by Islamic State militants on the Syrian city of Kobane (Nov. 6, 2014).

PHOTO: ARIS MESSINIS/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

fight with ISIS and other Islamist groups. French authorities estimate more than 700 people have traveled from France to fight in Syria, according to Barrett.”

Tragically, these fresh new Western recruits are many times used in deadly missions since they otherwise bring little value to IS. They usually do not speak the language and have very little military training. The twisted leaders of IS often use these “soldiers” for suicide bombings.

The success of ISIS has not just led to individuals joining them, but *entire* terrorist groups in Syria, Iraq and Egypt have folded under this new “caliphate.” They are also working hand-in-hand with some elements of al-Qaida in Syria.

Other “recruits” may not even have direct contact with the Islamic State. Attracted to the group’s radical ideology, they are inspired to commit deadly terror attacks in their home countries. Such acts include the October 2014 attack at the Canadian Parliament building and, most notably, the January 2015 wave of violence in Paris, France.

(8) Its Enemies Have Struggled to Find a Unified Strategy

The rise of IS caught the world completely off guard. It watched helplessly as the militant group swept across Iraq and Syria. Only when starving Yazidis (a small Christian sect) were stranded on a mountaintop after fleeing IS fighters did anyone intervene. The U.S. began putting together a coalition of nations to stop the spread of ISIS. About three years after America left Iraq, it found itself again launching airstrikes and dropping humanitarian aid on Iraqi soil.

The anti-ISIS coalition is now made up of 60 countries, but they are struggling to come up with a clear strategy. So far, they have done little to destroy ISIS aside from carrying out airstrikes and condemning their brutality.

In early December 2014, the coalition held its first meeting in Brussels: “The U.S.-led coalition against the Islamic State group also known as ISIS

has inflicted significant damage on the militant organization’s capabilities, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry said... Kerry specifically pointed to the 1,000 airstrikes carried out by the coalition so far in Iraq and Syria as contributing to the effort to weaken the group’s leadership, according to Reuters.

“The U.S. began launching airstrikes against ISIS in August following a massive territorial advance by the group in Iraq. While anti-ISIS forces in Iraq, including the country’s military, Kurdish forces and Sunni tribal fighters, have made some gains in heading off the group, Kerry said that the fight ‘will be measured most likely in years,’ Reuters reported.

“Kerry’s comments came at the start of an anti-ISIS coalition meeting, which included Iraq’s Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi and several foreign ministers from European and Arab countries, according to Gulf Today. It was the first high-level diplomatic meeting of the 60-member coalition. The group convened at NATO headquarters in Brussels, though Kerry emphasized that the meeting wasn’t a NATO event” (*International Business Times*).

Many countries signed on but some have conflicting priorities. For instance, *Newsweek* reported that Turkey’s motives for finally joining the group of nations fighting ISIS differ from what is being expected of them: “After a long period of hesitation, a bit of American arm-twisting and a fierce war fast closing in on its borders with Syria and Iraq, Turkey has finally joined the U.S.-led coalition against the extremists of the Islamic State, commonly known as ISIS.

“Or has it?”

“Turkey’s goals in joining the fight differ from what American officials say they are. In some cases, the Turkish aims may even create friction with other essential components of the coalition, pushing the U.S. to finesse those differences or make stark choices.”

Another example of the disjointed nature of the coalition is Shia Iran, an enemy of ISIS. Iran was not invited to the international coalition and said they would not attend even if invited.

Nevertheless, they carried out surprise airstrikes against ISIS in late November. China reportedly might be the next country to join the coalition.

At best, the coalition is a cobbled together group of countries who vaguely agree on the goal but cannot decide on tactics.

(9) It Is Difficult to Uproot

Once a virus infects a computer, it is extremely hard to remove it. ISIS is much the same. Despite persistent airstrikes, IS remains entrenched in Iraq and Syria. A number of headlines show this point in living color: “Syrian Kurds say air strikes against Isis are not working...” (*The Guardian*)—“Months of Bombing Makes Small Impact on ISIS’ Military” (*NBC News*)—“US Struggles to Turn the Tide in War Against ISIS” (*Agence France-Presse*).

New York Post reported that American military officials have stated that no amount of airstrikes will completely destroy IS and that ground troops will be required: “As the massive US-led air campaign plows ahead, the nation’s top military chief says it will take 15,000 ground troops to wipe out ISIS in Syria. Gen. Martin Dempsey, chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, made the statement at a...briefing as Britain, Belgium and Denmark joined the bombing campaign to wipe out the terror group in Iraq.

“‘The answer is yes. There has to be a ground component in the campaign,’ Dempsey said, appearing alongside Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel. ‘We need 12,000 to 15,000 to reclaim lost territory,’ he said, referring to the huge swath ISIS carved out from Iraq and Syria.”

(10) It Is Not Just Another Terrorist Group

The Islamic State is not just another modern terrorist group. It is rich and its revenue streams are not slowing down. It has a highly structured management team, including training programs to keep new recruits on the path to top leadership. It is willing to use any

Please see ISIS, page 26



POLITICS, POWER AND THE POPE

The Vatican's Rising Diplomatic Clout

The thaw in diplomatic relations between Cuba and the United States is just the beginning of greater Vatican involvement in world affairs.

BY SAMUEL C. BAXTER AND STACEY L. PALM

CUBANS AND AMERICANS alike watched with amazement as Presidents Raul Castro and Barack Obama announced that after more than 50 years, they had reestablished diplomatic relations. The last stronghold of the Cold War had breathed its last.

A swap had been made. Members of the Cuban Five, who were charged with terrorist activities in the U.S. and jailed for a decade, had been sent back to the island. Imprisoned U.S. contractor Alan Gross, who was accused of distributing banned telecommunication technologies to Havana's tiny Jewish community while working for USAID, along with another unnamed government intelligence official, was freed.

Cheers resounded in shops, schools and hotels throughout Havana. A classroom of young musicians had tears in their eyes upon hearing the news. For the first time, American and Cuban flags hung *together* from balconies.

Renewed relations are another step toward possibly lifting the *bloqueo*, the embargo long faulted for stopping Cubans from receiving supplies. American tourists just 90 miles off their home shores could spend money with credit cards. A U.S. embassy would once again be established. Construction materials could be imported to fix the nation's cracked and crumbling mansions now used for state housing. The Internet could become more accessible. The 1950s cars that for so long had been held together by rusty coat hangers and aluminum cans could receive updated parts.

A new era seemed to be dawning between the two countries. All because of...*the pope?*

Almost immediately, information circulated about the Vatican's involvement with the communist country. In fact, Pope Francis had previously written a letter to both presidents urging them to "initiate a new phase in relations," which essentially jumpstarted the entire process and led to the reconciliation.

This fact stunned many...*the Vatican?*

But perhaps it should not have been so much of a surprise. The Holy See, or the government of the Vatican, regularly sends emissaries around the world to be involved in multiple levels of diplomacy between nations. Their ambassadors are credited with having better on-the-ground information because of their ability to tap information from nuns and priests in local parishes.

More than 80 countries also have embassies in Italy for the Holy See, meaning there is an army of men and women whose sole purpose is to nurture the relationship between their countries and the Vatican.

In addition, the Holy See has special “permanent observer” status within the United Nations General Assembly and the Food and Agriculture Organization, and has full diplomatic relations with 177 countries out of 193 in the UN. It is even a member of organizations such as the International Atomic Energy Agency and the UN World Tourism Organization.

Unknown to most, the pope and the Vatican have long been involved both behind-the-scenes and in outright ways in many high-level diplomatic efforts—a trend that is bound to continue.

Intertwined in History

In the case of Cuba and the U.S., the Vatican sought reconciliation between the two countries for years, according to *Financial Times*.

“The Vatican has long taken a keen interest in US-Cuba relations, including John XXIII’s effort to end the Cuban missile crisis in October 1962. In recent decades, both John Paul II and Benedict XVI made visits to the island, which is more than 60 per cent Catholic, creating a well of trust Pope Francis was able to draw on.”

In 1998, John Paul became the first pope to visit the island nation since Fidel Castro’s 1959 revolution. Less than 10 years later, Benedict was the first pope to reopen a Catholic church on the island. While in Cuba, he also gained favor with the American Jewish community by agreeing to discuss with Mr. Castro the case of a man jailed the year before for espionage.

The Associated Press stated: “Pope Francis rightly got credit for helping bring the US and Cuba together and free US government subcontractor Alan Gross. But it was the Pope’s predecessor, Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI, who made the first high-level Vatican manoeuvre to release Gross,

New Course for U.S. and Cuba

The pope’s efforts to help the two countries restart relations are set against a backdrop of 55 years of tension.



Source: Council on Foreign Relations, Reuters
Graphic: Tribune News Service

Please see **POPE**, page 20

THE HUMAN PROBLEM

Would the Planet Be Better Off Without Us?

BY JEFFREY R. AMBROSE

IN A 2004 HOLLYWOOD thriller about the catastrophic effects of a climate gone haywire, the heroes face tidal waves, sudden deep freezes and other threats due to manmade weather upsets. Eventually, the worst is over and humanity prepares to rebuild, triumphant as usual.

The closing scene features two astronauts in the International Space Station looking down at an Earth that is icebound from the North Pole nearly to the Tropic of Cancer. Millions or billions have evidently perished, but the planet now has a pristine atmosphere with no visible

pollution. Earth has healed itself. One of the astronauts comments on how beautiful this picture is.

The film, which grossed half a billion dollars worldwide despite being discredited by some for scientific inaccuracy, ends with what amounts to a harsh criticism of how mankind affects the Earth.

But is a half-emptied planet with better air quality heartwarming?

More recently, a popular television series has theorized what the planet would be like “after people.” It depicts nature reclaiming cities, presumably after humans are extinct. Buildings decay and collapse, while meadows, wetlands and forests reappear.

This raises the uncomfortable question: Are *we* the problem? Would an Earth without human beings be a better place?

Sobering Track Record

Those who take a long look at mankind’s treatment of the planet have reason to be discouraged.

Widespread use of coal as fuel began to affect air quality in the early second millennium AD. With the Industrial Revolution, the environment in Europe’s largest cities began to deteriorate rapidly. At its worst, smog choked urban areas, sometimes killing scores or even hundreds of residents at a time.

By the mid-1800s, London and other factory-dense cities in Britain

■ **PLANET EARTH:** A German European Space Agency astronaut took this image of Earth reflecting light from the sun while aboard the International Space Station (July 17, 2014).

PHOTO: ALEXANDER GERST/ESA VIA GETTY IMAGES



were nicknamed the Big Smoke. Ash would literally rain from the sky, soiling clothing and layering the landscape in grime. At the same time, mass dumping of human waste into the River Thames led to the phenomenon called “the Big Stink,” with London enveloped in a near-intolerable stench.

Fast-forward to the modern world. In any populated area, the signs of human impact are now unavoidable.

Heavy use of nitrogen- and phosphorus-based fertilizers along the Mississippi River has created a “dead zone” in the Gulf of Mexico—an area in which the water’s oxygen levels are too low to support a body of water’s normal flora and fauna. This zone’s size is estimated to be 5,052 square miles, about the size of Connecticut. Other dead zones are found on the Oregon coast, Lake Erie, Chesapeake

Bay, and the Baltic and Black Seas in Europe.

The waters of Puget Sound, next to coffee-fueled Seattle, are literally caffeinated, as wastewater treatment plants cannot remove all of this stimulant. In similar fashion, female hormones, a byproduct of birth control pill use, now contaminate rivers and streams, sometimes leading to infertility in male fish.

Due to Midwest pollution snaking its way up to Maine and out to the Atlantic, causing acid rain, some lakes in New York’s storied Adirondack State Park are no longer able to support fish populations. While this is a relatively small number of the region’s abundant lakes, this is a reminder that man’s activity can touch even the most seemingly remote and pristine places—from a distance.

Further north, the stunning blue-green waters of Lake Louise in Canada’s Banff National Park, a renowned symbol of the nation’s natural beauty, are now shadowed by “unsafe to drink” signs.

Not even the deep ocean is safe. The Eastern Garbage Patch, considered the world’s largest “landfill,” is a floating collection of marine debris, including plastics and chemical waste, swirling in the North Pacific. It is estimated to be larger than the size of Texas.

Environmental Disasters

The impact of such gradual, long-term damage seems minor in comparison to single events that have redefined man’s ability to scar the planet.

Prince William Sound, Alaska, 1989: The oil spill caused by an Exxon oil tanker, the Valdez, off the coast of Alaska was one of the watershed moments for the environmentalist cause. News footage of live and dead birds covered in dark brown crude oil shocked America. The Valdez leaked nearly 11 million gallons of oil, about a fifth of the ship’s petroleum payload. Over 1,100 miles of coastline were affected by a slick that spread over 11,000 square miles. The cleanup lasted for years, requiring thousands of workers.



Chernobyl, Ukraine, 1986: When a reactor at the Chernobyl nuclear plant exploded, it sent xenon, iodine, cesium and other radioactive materials into the air and eventually the groundwater in Ukraine as well as Russia and Belarus. Thirty workers died in the immediate aftermath of the accident, but its effects still linger today. Thyroid cancer among children in the region is common, and a high percentage of babies are born with partial or missing limbs.

Bhopal, India, 1984: In history’s worst environmental disaster, a chemical plant leaked massive amounts of methyl isocyanate into the air, killing 20,000 in the short term and leaving behind long-term health effects for local Indians.

“Blind, lame, limbs twisted or missing, deafmute, brain-damaged, with hare-lips, cleft palates, webbed fingers, cerebral palsy, tumors where

should be eyes, these are Bhopal’s children. The living children. The still-born often cannot be recognized as human” (*The Bhopal Medical Appeal*).

One Bhopal resident recalled the scene as noxious fumes filled the air.

“‘It felt like somebody had filled our bodies up with red chilies, our eyes tears coming out, noses were watering, we had froth in our mouths. The coughing was so bad that people were writhing in pain. Some people just got up and ran in whatever they were wearing or even if they were wearing nothing at all. Somebody was running this way and somebody was running that way, some people were just running in their underclothes. People were only concerned as to how they would save their lives so they just ran.

“‘Those who fell were not picked up by anybody, they just kept falling,

and were trampled on by other people. People climbed and scrambled over each other to save their lives—even cows were running and trying to save their lives and crushing people as they ran.’ In those apocalyptic moments no one knew what was happening. People simply started dying in the most hideous ways...The force of the human torrent wrenched children’s hands from their parents’ grasp. Families were whirled apart” (ibid.).

“To dress it and to keep it”

According to the Bible, the Creator of man intended that he exercise stewardship over the planet He had renewed. “And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it” (Gen. 2:15).

Has humanity “kept” the earth?

The case can be made that prosperous nations such as the United States,



■ **WIDESPREAD IMPACT:** Left, the first half of the Chernobyl New Safe Confinement, an arch that will cover the reactor building, is seen after it was pushed to its site at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant (April 3, 2014). Right, a fisherman carries an oil-soaked bird at a rescue center in Valdez, Alaska (April 3, 1989).

PHOTO: ANATOLIY STEPANOV/AFP/GETTY IMAGES (LEFT); CHRIS WILKINS/AFP/GETTY IMAGES (RIGHT)

Canada and some European states have made progress.

London eventually passed legislation to limit air pollution after a number of mass fatalities. The Environmental Protection Agency was established by the United States government in 1970 to clean up existing problems and regulate industry to prevent excessive pollution. University researchers have been able to revive some dead lakes in northern New York by adding “antacid” solutions.

Yet governments have searched in vain for the proper *balance* between necessary *use* of the Earth and *abuse* of its resources, generally falling into one of the two extreme positions of nature worship or rapacious greed.

Meanwhile, debate among citizens rages: “We are not doing enough to save the Earth!”—“No! *Too much* money is being spent on environmental causes!”—“But we are ruining the planet!”—“Taxpayers’ money should

not be spent on things like crosswalks for salamanders!”

Hope for the Future

Beyond the politics of the issue is the ultimate question. Is human extinction in our future? Will Hollywood’s fantasies become reality?

Looking at present conditions too closely, for too long, can provoke gloom. There is no doubt that humanity does possess destructive—ultimately *self-destructive*—tendencies. Its capacity for creativity and progress comes with a strong negative undertow.

With even the most well-meaning plans, shortsighted thinking can lead to unforeseen consequences, whether of harvesting trees or building a combustion engine to power an automobile.

The heart of the problem is that mankind, as a whole, does not truly

acknowledge an authority greater than itself. While many profess to follow a “Higher Power,” the vast majority will not change their lives in order to submit to that Power. As a result, humanity has no guidance, and is forced to learn many painful lessons the hard way—by trial and error.

For those who believe and understand the Bible—assumed by many, but proven by few, to be the Word of God—there is hope for the future. Despite stockpiles of weapons and the threat of “mutually assured destruction,” God will not allow mankind to be erased! But prophecy makes plain that the worst of times are ahead of us, followed by the very best of times.

If you would like to learn about an alternative to the hard path of trial and error—found in the Bible—read our booklet *Bible Authority...Can It Be Proven?* at rcg.org/bacibp. □



■ **HEAVY TOLL:** Left, support ships are seen near where the Deepwater Horizon spill in the Gulf of Mexico occurred (July 3, 2010). Right, victims of the Bhopal tragedy receive first aid from doctors at a hospital. The gas leak from the Union Carbide factory killed 20,000 people and injured around 30,000 (Dec. 4, 1984).

PHOTO: JOE RAEDLE/GETTY IMAGES (LEFT); BEDI/AFP/GETTY IMAGES (RIGHT)



■ **DIPLOMATIC INFLUENCE:** Left, Pope John Paul II is greeted by Cuban President Fidel Castro at the Palace of the Revolution in Havana just prior to their private talks (Jan. 22, 1998). Middle, Cubans wave to Pope Benedict XVI in Havana (March 28, 2012). Right, Pope Benedict XVI and Cuban President Raul Castro arrive at Revolution Palace in Havana (March 27, 2012).

PHOTOS: PAUL HANNA/AFP/GETTY IMAGES (LEFT); STR/AFP/GETTY IMAGES (MIDDLE); ADALBERTO ROQUE/POOL/AFP/GETTY IMAGES (RIGHT)

POPE

Continued from page 15

spurred in part by an unlikely group of papal lobbyists.”

“The American Jewish Committee was one of several Jewish groups that approached the Vatican in the months before Benedict’s March 2012 visit to Cuba to ask that the German pontiff raise the issue of the Jewish captive on humanitarian grounds with Cuba’s leadership. The Associated Press has learned.”

While the effort failed to yield the lifting of the embargo or the prisoner’s release, the case garnered further attention in Washington circles.

Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, who later became Pope Francis, was present during John Paul II’s 1998 visit to Cuba and also authored a book about the Catholic leader’s meeting with the longtime dictator.

As a result of Francis’s reconciliatory efforts, this year will be the first Summit of the Americas that Cuba has been invited to attend, having been the only country excluded from the proceedings since the organization began.

A native of Argentina, Francis is no stranger to the effect Cuba’s political situation has played in his home continent. For many decades, he witnessed military juntas and government instability throughout Central and South America and saw their results.

For example, he lived in Argentina during the nation’s Dirty War, during which the Argentinian government was responsible for the disappearance of thousands of political opponents. Many were said to have been taken from their homes and then dropped out of planes. To this day, thousands of families have not received answers about what happened to their loved ones.

“Francis’ experience of poverty and structural inequality in his homeland also influenced his view that economic injustice is at the heart of the world’s conflicts,” *Religion News Service* explained. “It’s the lens he used to explain his ideas on peacemaking...”

To signify the importance of the continent to him, he appointed a pair of men familiar with the area’s policies to two of the top positions within the Catholic Church. In addition, his eight-person advisory board is filled with men who have experience working in Latin America and developing nations.

Vision for the Vatican

After taking office, Francis laid out his diplomatic plan, which included evangelizing the masses through outreach, employing principles of social justice, an emphasis on inequality as “the root of social ills” and interreligious dialogue.

In an encyclical that he coauthored with his predecessor, Pope Francis wrote: “For the Church today, three areas of dialogue stand out where she needs to be present in order to promote

full human development and to pursue the common good: dialogue with states, dialogue with society—including dialogue with cultures and the sciences—and dialogue with other believers who are not part of the Catholic Church. In each case, ‘the Church speaks from the light which faith offers’, contributing her two thousand year experience and keeping ever in mind the life and sufferings of human beings. This light transcends human reason, yet it can also prove meaningful and enriching to those who are not believers and it stimulates reason to broaden its perspectives.”

Throughout his time in office, Francis has used dramatic gestures to further his diplomatic efforts. During a visit to Israel, he prayed with his head against the controversial wall dividing Israel from the West Bank and recognized Palestine as a state. Then he accompanied Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to a place that had special significance to Israelis and prayed there. He regularly shuns his bulletproof popemobile for normal cars and walks among thronging crowds to the dismay of his security teams. While in Turkey, he knelt and asked for the blessing of Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew I, the leader of 300 million followers. This had never before been done by a pope.

His decision to intervene in Cuba was described by *Time* magazine as “perhaps Pope Francis’ boldest foreign policy move yet, but it is not his first.” According to the outlet:

■ “He showed letter-writing prowess in September 2013, when he wrote to Russian President Vladimir Putin, host of the G-20 Summit which Obama was attending, urging world leaders and the United States to oppose a military intervention in Syria.”

■ “After visiting Bethlehem and Jerusalem in May, Pope Francis hosted both Israeli president Shimon Peres and Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas at the Vatican for a joint prayer service for Middle East Peace.”

■ “When he visited South Korea in August, he sent a telegram to Chinese President Xi Jinping when the papal plane crossed into Chinese airspace—a historic step toward improved relations since the last time a pope visited East Asia, Chinese officials did not allow the plane to fly over Chinese territory.”

As to not offend the Chinese, he also refused to meet with the Dalai Lama, whom China considers a political dissident.

On the Middle Eastern front, in December 2014, Pope Francis issued a letter to Christians there in an attempt to comfort them in their time of trial due to religious persecution. But he also used the letter to make pointed political statements (emphasis added): “The majority of you live in environments which are predominantly Muslim. *You can help your Muslim fellow citizens to present with discernment a more authentic image of Islam*, as so many of them desire, reiterating that Islam is a religion of peace, one which is compatible with respect for human rights and favours peaceful coexistence on the part of all. This will prove beneficial for them and for all society. The tragic situation faced by our Christian brothers and sisters in Iraq, as well as by the Yazidi and members of other religious and ethnic communities, *demands that all religious leaders clearly speak out to condemn these crimes unanimously and unambiguously, and to denounce the practice of invoking religion in order to justify them.*”

He further stated: “At the same time I continue to urge the international community to address your needs and those

of other suffering minorities, above all by promoting peace through negotiation and diplomacy, for the sake of stemming and stopping as soon as possible the violence which has already caused so much harm. *I once more condemn in the strongest possible terms the traffic of arms.* Instead, what are needed are plans and initiatives for peace, so as to further a global solution to the region’s problems. How much longer must the Middle East suffer from the lack of peace? We must not resign ourselves to conflicts as if change were not possible! In the spirit of my pilgrimage to the Holy Land and the subsequent prayer meeting in the Vatican with the Israeli and Palestinian presidents, I encourage you to continue to pray for peace in the Middle East. May those forced to leave their lands be able to return and to live in dignity and security.”

For his work with Jewish communities around the world, he has also garnered the title as the most “Jewish” pope to date, having developed a strong connection with Argentina’s Jewish community and even co-authored a book with Argentinian rabbi Abraham Skorka.

“There has never been a Pope with as deep an understanding of Jews as Pope Francis,” Rabbi David Rosen, leader of the American Jewish Council said in a statement on the organization’s website.

Pope Francis has repeatedly called for peace in the Middle East region and continues to stay involved in the peace-making process through the updates he receives regularly from his diplomatic corps.

In addition, through his tenure, he has also continued to speak against economic inequality and even climate change—two topics that he addressed in his *Evangelii Gaudium* (“The Joy of the Gospel”) and with which he has found solidarity with U.S. President Barack Obama.

20th Century

The diplomatic approach of Benedict and Francis follows in the footsteps of John Paul II, who was pope from 1978-2005.

John Paul II’s greatest diplomatic achievement was helping to bring down the Berlin Wall and end communism in his native Poland—and all of Europe. Francis acknowledged John Paul II’s role in this historic event on the 25th anniversary of the wall coming down.

The Associated Press reported: “Pope Francis has hailed St. Pope John Paul II’s role in the fall of the Berlin Wall and urged people to build bridges by opening hearts.

“Francis marked the 25th anniversary...of the destruction of the wall symbolizing the Cold War by appealing to all those of good will to foster a ‘culture of coming together’ to bring down all barriers still dividing the world.”

But how did John Paul II succeed in bringing down the Berlin Wall? The same way Francis has improved relations with Cuba and the U.S.: by working with the most powerful politician on the planet.

Time magazine reported in 1992 that the pope and U.S. President Ronald Reagan “agreed to undertake a clandestine campaign to hasten the dissolution of the communist empire.”

It worked. The Berlin Wall fell, and the Soviet Union soon after.

The tag team of pope and president has been a winning way to effect change in the world.

This pattern began when Woodrow Wilson met with Pope Benedict XV in 1919. The first Catholic president, John F. Kennedy, was the one who really pushed things forward by visiting Vatican City in 1963. The ties slowly grew until Ronald Reagan and Pope John Paul II backed the common goal to end communism.

Other presidents also had close ties to John Paul II. For example, George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush all attended his funeral.

George W. Bush continued the trend with Pope Benedict XVI. The two had a friendly relationship and wished to see Christian values spread through the world in a time where radical Islam was making headlines.

Now President Obama appears to have teamed up with the Vatican

to address societal problems such as income inequality, unemployment and even climate change.

While the relationship between pope and president has grown over the years, it is not the Vatican-American connection that is most interesting. Rather, it is that the pope seeks out the most powerful political leader alive—and that the U.S. president seeks out the most powerful spiritual leader alive.

“The real extent of the Vatican’s power is hard to compute,” *The Economist* stated. “One in every six human beings was baptised into the pope’s church. Of course, many quit the faith, but he remains a global opinion-former. His views can sway Catholic votes—a point not lost on American presidents, who rarely miss a chance to visit the Vatican.”

Popes have held varying amounts of power for centuries, but the emphasis on subtle diplomacy is a relatively newer trend for the Vatican.

Changing Tactics

The role of pope as diplomat is the product of substantial changes in the Catholic Church over the last 100 years. The organization had to reinvent itself for the 20th century.

For much of its existence, the Catholic Church had land holdings, could tax citizens, and had an army to enforce its will (which included spreading church doctrine). It was a powerful state, with the pope having both physical and spiritual clout.

But this changed in the second half of the 1800s. In 1870, the papal states were stripped away. At the time, Pope Pius IX became a “prisoner in the Vatican.” He was forced to give up his secular power and instead worked to consolidate his spiritual power.

The 11th edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* described this time: “Pius might no longer rule over the papal states; but there was consolation in the thought that, within the realm of conscience, his power had increased by leaps and bounds. The whole history of the 19th century [was a continuous effort] to exalt the importance of the papacy.”

This drive to increase the prominence of the papacy continued into the 20th century. Finally, in 1929, Italian Prime Minister Benito Mussolini signed the Lateran Treaty which made the 109-acre Vatican City into its own official nation. At the time, Italy also gave the Vatican \$92 million (about \$1 billion in today’s dollars) in reparations for taking the papal states. The money infused a cash-strapped church, and allowed it to hasten its transformation into the global moral authority seen today.

Popes have had to change their approach to spreading their message. The 20th century inventions of radio and television have been handily used to push forward the messages of the popes. They have also increasingly used their celebrity to advance their public and political agendas.

For example, Pope John Paul II was particularly skilled at using small theatrical gestures on television to get his point across. Today, Francis does the same and has even taken to social media outlets such as Twitter. His Twitter feed is translated into nine languages and is followed by 17 million people.

Focus on Home

Aside from working with the Americas, Pope Francis has also turned his eyes toward the very place in which the Vatican is housed: Europe. Despite the pope’s personal effectiveness in the public arena, he realizes that to achieve his ultimate vision for the world, it requires buy-in and support from politicians and other leaders.

“History’s first pope from outside the West travelled to the heart of secular Europe...and delivered a sharp wake-up call, warning European leaders that the continent risks irrelevance if it doesn’t recover its founding values, drawing in part on its Christian legacy,” an article in Vatican insider magazine *Crux* reported.

“Pope Francis delivered back-to-back speeches to the European Parliament and the Council of Europe that amounted to a strong call to Europe to get both its social and its spiritual house in order.

“Before roughly 750 members of the European parliament, Francis bluntly said today’s world is becoming ‘less and less Eurocentric,’ that Europe often comes off as ‘elderly and haggard,’ that it’s less and less a ‘protagonist’ in global affairs, and that the rest of the planet sometimes sees it ‘with mistrust and even suspicion.’

“‘Where is your vigour?’ Francis asked the Council of Europe, deliberately speaking through it to the entire continent. ‘Where is that idealism that inspired and ennobled your history?’”

The article further stated, “Francis insisted that recovering Europe’s Christian history and entering into ‘meaningful’ and ‘open’ dialogue with its religious traditions ‘does not represent a threat to the secularity of states, or to the independence of the institutions of the European Union.’

“Instead, he said, it’s the basis for ‘a humanism centered on respect for the dignity of the human person.’

“‘The 2,000-year history that links Europe and Christianity,’ he said, ‘isn’t free of conflicts and errors, even sins,’ but at its best, it’s driven by ‘the desire [to] work for the good of all.’”

A *Vatican Radio* transcript quoted the same speech, in which he also stated: “I am likewise convinced that a Europe which is capable of appreciating its religious roots and of grasping their fruitfulness and potential, will be all the more immune to the many forms of extremism spreading in the world today, not least as a result of the great vacuum of ideals which we are currently witnessing in the West, since ‘it is precisely man’s forgetfulness of God, and his failure to give him glory, which gives rise to violence.’”

He concluded his speech by saying that he desires to see a “Europe which bestrides the earth surely and securely, a precious point of reference for all humanity!” which elicited enthusiastic applause and a standing ovation by those present.

Without a doubt, the pope will continue to focus on improving Europe’s position in the global sphere. Indeed, Cuba is just the beginning of more active papal diplomacy. □

Frigid temperatures and dreary skies do not often spark excitement, but proper planning and a positive attitude can make wintertime fun.

THE LOCAL FORECAST on television announces another imminent cold front. Staring out a frost-covered window watching snowflakes accumulate on the ground, a heavy feeling squelches any sense of motivation you might have: the winter blues have officially settled in.

It is obvious your children feel them too. Cooped up in the house, they become restless and find themselves getting into mischief. It seems their attention spans have contracted as much as your desire to do anything.

While some experts classify the depressed feeling that accompanies the change in seasons as “Seasonal Affective Disorder” or specifically “winter depression,” both children and adults experience some degree of melancholy as daylight hours diminish and lush landscapes whirl into blank pages of white. Feeling trapped inside their homes, they blame the lack of sunlight for their moodiness, disinterest in normal activities, weight gain, and constant drowsiness.

According to statistics from the American Academy of Family Physicians, winter depression affects approximately 4 to 6 percent of the United States population—about 1 in every 16—who feel inexplicably dispirited five months of the year. Similarly, the “disorder” is said to affect 1 in 50 people in Britain. Even if the feeling is not enough to be classified as outright depression, between 10 to 20 percent of the U.S.



Chase Away the
**WINTER
BLUES!**



“There are plenty of ways to keep active during the wintertime—and effectively ward off the winter blues that threaten to dampen our moods and limit productivity.”

population experiences some form of mild winter blues.

But with all the other worries that threaten to alter our attitudes—troubled relationships, sick children, financial problems, etc.—must we let something as fickle as the *weather* dictate our mood?

Though it *is* scientifically proven that a bright, warm, sunny day can cause us to be more chipper and that our serotonin and melatonin levels do vary more during this time, the *attitude* with which we approach the gray, icy days of winter will determine whether we continue to be productive during this time.

Get Outside

During the winter, the Earth rejuvenates itself and prepares to spring anew. Animals enter hibernation, permitting other species of flora and fauna to regenerate. Instead of being disheartened by the frosty forecast, be excited about the coming of this important time.

Just because nature goes into hibernation does not mean humans were meant to do so. There are plenty of

ways to keep active during the wintertime—and effectively ward off the winter blues that threaten to dampen our moods and limit productivity.

One of the ways is by getting outdoors. Taking the time to properly bundle for the cold will open a whole new world of fun to you and your children. Wearing the correct mittens, scarf, hat and thermal undergarments will make all the difference and prevent frostbite.

Imagine your little ones' delight while watching you roll a small ball of snow into a full snowman, complete with charcoal eyes and a carrot nose. Or their excitement as you sled down a hill together. Other winter sports options include skiing, ice skating, ice fishing, snowboarding or building snow forts.

If you and your children do not enjoy any of the above activities, create your own games and invite your children's friends to participate. Although the activities may be silly or you may have other tasks you need to accomplish, your children will appreciate the time you spend with them. Given that children are our greatest

stewardship, we must always prioritize time with them.

If you do not have children, organize a skiing or sledding outing with friends to recapture your youth. Experts agree that spending time outdoors with friends can elevate your mood.

Aside from the fun factor, most health experts also recommend fresh air to help build strong muscles and bones in children and to help relieve stress in adults.

Be Proactive

Contrary to popular belief, winter should *not* be a time for laziness. Though gym attendance drops off during winter, you can be different!

Of course, if icy roads pose safety risks, stay at home, but do not be inactive. This can lead to lethargy.

Even if you are unable to go to the gym, working out with an exercise video or lifting free weights is a viable option.

Remember, your children will follow your example. If they see you sitting at home depressed about the weather, they will assume it is acceptable behavior. On the other hand, if you maintain a high energy level during the winter, the season's arrival will not faze them.

If you have children or younger family members, build a pillow fort with them or teach them a dance they can later perform for relatives. If you are not athletically inclined, crafts are a great way to occupy young minds and keep them continually learning. Use these opportunities to teach your children to think of others and express their creativity. The Internet is brimming with ideas for children's indoor activities.

Being proactive also means organizing and prioritizing what you need to accomplish during the winter months. View winter as an opportunity to catch up on tasks you could not bring yourself to do when the sun was shining brightly outside. What about those pictures from last year's family get-together that have been sitting in a box for the past year? Or that drawer of items you are not sure what to do with? Now is the perfect time to sort out the clutter that has accrued since summertime.

Include your children while organizing. Demonstrating the importance of order will help them manage their own lives later. Also, teaching them to be tidy will save you from having to clean up after them.

Whatever you do indoors, do not let the television trap you into thinking that winter is a good excuse for a continual date with the couch. Statistics show that children spend more time—44.5 hours per week!—in front of a screen than any activity other than sleeping.

In addition, obesity in children and adults tends to increase the more hours they watch television.

Winter can also be a time to show others that you care. Cooking a hot meal for an elderly couple or offering to shovel their driveway can be a great way to help them ward off winter's biting chill. The weather often makes it difficult for the elderly to move about.

Use this time to think of others. Doing so will help eradicate the "woe is me" attitude that the winter blues can bring and give you a more positive winter outlook.

Dive into a Book

Just as it is important to be physically active, it is equally imperative to exercise your mind. Statistics from

the National Endowment for the Arts show that reading improves quality of life and gives "children a better future, makes us more useful in the workforce, and encourages us to build our communities."

Along with making you a more efficient employee, reading builds confidence, and strengthens your comprehension and analytical skills. Studies have even shown that those who read regularly land higher paying jobs.

In this fast-paced world, less people are reading for enjoyment than ever before. What better way to travel to a new destination, augment your grammar skills, and become more cultured than through a good book? Though television can show you new places, it does not expand your mind and force you to think like a book.

If you are a parent, turn off the television and read to your children. Explain how snow is formed and its many benefits for the Earth. This will help them (and you!) to appreciate the beauty of the crystalline flakes that cover the ground during winter.

Eat Healthfully

Of course, none of the above activities can be accomplished without exercising proper eating habits. Given that winter is the time of high heating bills

and increased auto expenses, many tend to lean toward cheaper processed foods to save money. In other words, foods that pack on pounds!

Depending on where you live, vegetables may be difficult or expensive to obtain during winter. This, however, should not diminish their importance. Consuming excessive portions of carbohydrates without adequate amounts of vegetables can lead to weight gain.

The United Kingdom Department of Health recommends that adults consume at least two portions of fruit and three portions of vegetables each day. However, according to a 2013 study produced by the UK's Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, just "24% of men, 29% of women and 18% of children (aged 5 to 15 years) consumed the recommended 5 A DAY."

Experiment with cooking different kinds of vegetables that may be cheaper to buy in the winter. Sweet potatoes can substitute starchy white potatoes, and are an excellent source of vitamins A and C, and antioxidants, which help prevent sickness.

If you are a mother with children, spend time instructing them how to maintain a healthy diet. Teaching them to eat correctly when they are young will guarantee them a lifetime of good health.

Make the Most of It

Above all, never forget that winter is a time for fun and an opportunity to spend quality time with friends and family. Whether enjoying the chilly weather outdoors or doing activities indoors with loved ones, you will both build wintertime memories you will cherish for years to come.

Use the cold months to organize and prioritize your life indoors. Then, when sunny weather comes, you and your children can take full advantage of it.

While the winter months continue, however, think about all the fun things you can still do. And if the weatherman predicts snow, you and your little ones will be ready to combat the coldness and beat the winter blues with an active approach to life. □

■ **WINTER SQUASH:** Various types of colorful winter squash are displayed for sale.



ISIS

Continued from page 13

means necessary to keep its power. It is filled with experienced military officials and is skilled in social media campaigns and propaganda. Multiple terrorist groups are coming under the black flag of ISIS.

A U.S. State Department official stated that IS is worse than al-Qaida: “Top officials crisscrossed the Capitol...giving urgent warnings that ISIS represented a threat ‘worse than Al Qaeda,’ in the words of one State Department official, with the capability to create a sanctuary for global jihadists working to threaten American interests.

“The self-declared Islamic State in Iraq and Syria is no longer merely a terrorist organization, a top State Department official told House and Senate lawmakers, but ‘a full-blown army seeking to establish a self-governing state through the Tigris and Euphrates Valley in what is now Syria and Iraq” (*The Daily Beast*).

The previously mentioned *Vice News* documentary summarized the situation this way: “While no one knows exactly how to deal with the escalating crisis, the fighters of the Islamic State grow bolder.”

(11) Its Goal Is Global Domination

Many wonder what IS’s ultimate goal is. All one must do is simply take them at their word. Their stated goal could be summarized in the following way: unification of all Muslims and destruction of the West en route to global domination.

The goal of unifying Muslims and taking power can be seen in the approach IS has taken to Shia and even Sunni tribes. Islamic State butchers have executed thousands of “apostate” Muslims, burying them in mass graves and brazenly filming the atrocities and posting them online. IS even blew up a Sunni mosque in Mosul that supposedly housed the biblical prophet Jonah’s tomb. They also have made it clear they want to take over Iran, Saudi

Arabia, and Jordan, to name just a few of their target countries.

Attacking and destroying Western civilization, including Christianity, seems to be the next step in their plans. In the eyes of ISIS fighters, Christian “infidels” must be killed or subjugated.

IS adherents talk about “destroying the cross by the sword.” These words are being backed by actions.

Before the fall of Mosul, 30,000 Christians fled. When IS fighters entered the city, they destroyed Christian churches. The Armenian Catholic Church of the Martyrs in Raqqa was converted into an Islamic center.

An IS Press Officer in Raqqa told a *Vice News* journalist: “I say to America that the Islamic State has been established. And we will not stop. Don’t be cowards and attack us with drones. Instead send your soldiers, the ones we humiliated in Iraq. We will humiliate them everywhere, God willing, and we will raise the flag of Allah in the White House...”

This dire warning portends a potential showdown between the unstoppable force (IS) and the immovable object (Christianity and the West).

“Perilous Times”

The rise of ISIS is like nothing the world has ever seen. Their appearance has left the world community scrambling to combat them. Yet no country, other than a war-weary America, has even discussed taking a serious approach to uprooting them. Seeing the sobering and increasing levels of unrest in the Middle East, many are afraid of what ISIS means for the future of this region.

These dangerous times have caused millions of people, Christians and non-Christians alike, to wonder if mankind has reached the “end-times.” Others believe without doubt that we are living in the “end of days.”

Can this question be answered—with *proof*?

The answer begins with Jesus Christ’s words in John 16. Most do not realize the Bible speaks of our time.

Jesus Christ spoke of a period just before His Second Coming when people

would kill and think that they were serving God. Notice: “...*the time comes*, that whosoever kills you will think that he does God service” (vs. 2).

Christ was talking to His disciples at the time, but His next statements recorded in verses 3 and 4 show He was primarily addressing His followers who would come later: “And these things will they do unto you, because they have not known the Father, nor Me. But these things have I told you, that when the time shall come, you may remember that I told you of them...”

Most do not realize that Bible prophecy is being fulfilled in *our* time—and can be seen in today’s headlines. This modern dangerous world was foretold.

Notice what God inspired the apostle Paul to record in II Timothy 3: “This know also, that *in the last days perilous times* shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, traitors, heady, highminded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God; having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away” (vs. 1-5).

Perilous times. Boasters. Proud. Blasphemers. Fierce! Sound familiar?

Even more, *Thayer’s New Testament Greek Lexicon* defines the word “perilous” as “savage.” Without a doubt, the actions of ISIS are just that—SAVAGE.

In Jesus’ famous Olivet prophecy, He stated that the end times would begin with “wars and rumors of wars: see that you be not troubled: for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom...in [various] places. All these are the beginning of sorrows” (Matt. 24:6-8).

The rise of the Islamic State undoubtedly becomes another element of proof that humanity has reached the end times. To learn about the other proofs—straight from your Bible!—request the free booklet *Are These the Last Days?* at rcg.org/atlld. □

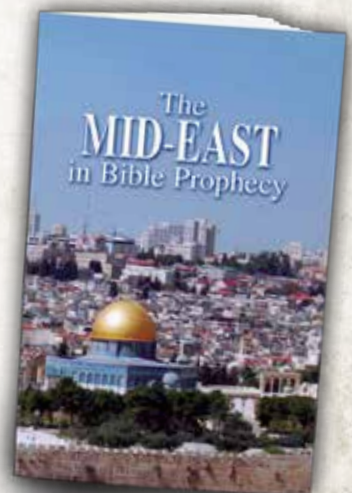


WHY MIDDLE EAST TURMOIL?

Few understand the historical roots of the Middle East. There, nations, cultures, religions, history and politics collide—*with prophecy!* How will its problems be resolved? What does the Bible say?

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Order your free copy of *The Mid-East in Bible Prophecy* at rcg.org/tmeibp.



PERSONAL

Continued from page 2

(II Pet. 3:3-4). Beware of those who scoff at all end-time prophecy.

Matthew 24 primarily deals with the final destruction of Jerusalem, possibly including a restored temple. This destruction is referred to as “the abomination that makes desolate” in Daniel 12:11. (Notice Matthew 24:15 and Mark 13:14.) While many Bible prophecies have dual fulfillments, “the abomination of desolation” has *three*.

The *first* occurred in 167 BC, when Syrian king Antiochus Epiphanes offered a pig to the Greek god Zeus on the Temple altar in Jerusalem. The *second* fulfillment is a type of what Christ referred to in Matthew 24:15, when Roman armies destroyed Jerusalem in AD 70. The *third* fulfillment—the *main* one—is now imminent!

Before Christ returns, armies will again surround Jerusalem. God’s people are warned to flee.

Matthew 24:16 states, “Then let them which be in Judea FLEE into the mountains.” At the third and final fulfillment, immediately before the Tribulation, God states in Revelation 12:14 that His people will literally *flee*. (To learn more about world conditions preceding Christ’s Return, read my article “What Is the ‘Abomination of Desolation?’” at rcg.org/witaod and my booklet *Are These the Last Days?* at rcg.org/attdl.)

The coming Great Tribulation is real—as is God’s promise to protect His people. But, unlike the rapture theory, the Bible reveals there is a designated place ON EARTH—not heaven—where His Church will be safe during the three-and-a-half—not seven—years of Tribulation. Matthew 24 also reveals that the surrounding of Jerusalem by foreign forces is the event that signals when God’s people should *flee* to safety!

Jesus was concerned for His people. He warned of what was coming, and of the need to escape invading

armies and escalating war. He knew three problems would be apparent. First, those with small children, and especially nursing babies, would have particular difficulty escaping (vs. 19). Second, God’s people should pray that the time of flight not be in winter—meaning *wintery conditions*, because a related prophecy points directly to a wintertime flight. The third had to do with the Sabbath (vs. 20). Obedience to the sanctity of God’s seventh-day Sabbath—which God’s Church has always observed, and would therefore still be faithfully observing right to the end—could make flight more difficult.

Consider: why would Christ instruct to pray concerning the time of flight if His servants were going to be supernaturally sucked away? Rapturists ignore this by incorrectly focusing on, “Let him which is on the housetop not come down to take anything out of his house” (Matt. 24:17; Mark 13:15). Such misrepresentation bypasses any need for *personal responsibility!*

Christ wants His Church prayerfully involved in their escape—not self-assured, lazing back, expecting a heavenly vacuum cleaner to do it all for them! See through not only the false—but irresponsible—rapture theory.

Rapture “Proof Texts”

Supporters cite five verses as “proof” of the rapture.

First is Daniel 9:27, which they believe sets the table: “And He shall confirm the covenant with many for one week: and in the *midst of the week* He shall cause the sacrifice and the oblation to cease, and for the overspreading of abominations he shall make it *desolate*, even until the consummation, and that determined shall be poured upon the desolate.”

Adherents claim the phrase “one week” refers to society’s last seven *years*. This is false!

This verse *actually* references the abomination of desolation, when occupying forces stop the Jews’ daily sacrifice at the Temple. It also

addresses the final week of the *70 weeks prophecy* about the Messiah and that *Jesus Christ* would be cut off in the middle of the week, after three and a half prophetic “days”—three and a half *years*—of His earthly mission. Daniel 9:27 is not a prophecy about how the *antichrist* will turn on the Jews halfway through the Tribulation.

Second is Matthew 24:36 and 40-42: “But of that day and hour knows no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but My Father only...Then shall two be in the field; the one shall be taken, and the other left. Two women shall be grinding at the mill; the one shall be taken, and the other left. Watch therefore: for you know not what hour your Lord does come.”

Comprehending any difficult scripture begins with knowing its context. Beginning in verse 40, Jesus explains the condition of society in the last days. People will be “in the field” and “at the mill,” carrying on daily activities. They will also be “eating and drinking” and “marrying and giving in marriage.” In other words, life will *seem* normal *just before destruction—just before the snare*. Verse 42 confirms that this will come *unexpectedly*. Famine, pestilence and military invasion will together claim two-thirds of the population of the modern nations of Israel. Read Ezekiel 5:12. Captivity—enslavement!—will take the remaining third. Before this, God’s people will certainly be “taken” to safety.

Next is John 14:2-3: “In My Father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto Myself; that where I am, there you may be also.”

The question becomes: where will Christ be?

One of the greatest problems with the rapture is that heaven is not, and has never been, the reward of the saved. Jesus said, “The meek shall inherit *the earth*” (Matt. 5:5). He was quoting Psalm 37:11, which says the

same thing. Now add this passage: “And has made us unto our God kings and priests: and we [Christians] shall *reign on the earth*” (Rev. 5:10). These verses explain why He also said, “No man has ascended up to heaven” (John 3:13). So then, not only are God’s people not raptured to heaven before Christ returns, they are not going there later. Further, no one is in heaven *now*.

Christ’s coming again in John 14 will be to *Earth*. He will be *here*. The word translated “mansions” means “rooms,” “abodes” or “residences.” The Temple held rooms for various priests who administered there. Different rooms signify differing *positions of authority*. Christ’s parable of the pounds, in Luke 19:11-27, makes these positions over cities easy to understand. “Mansions” simply refers to OFFICES—or positions of authority.

You will want to read my booklet *Do the Saved Go to Heaven?* at rcg.org/dtsgth—then the book, *The Awesome Potential of Man* at rcg.org/tapom. The millions who worry about being “left behind” never hear the TRUTH about salvation. This inspiring book brings it.

True salvation is infinitely greater than going to heaven. John 14 reveals that, after His Return, Jesus’ faithful servants will work under Him as kings and priests. Just the truth of salvation—rulership over cities beside Jesus Christ *on Earth*—reduces the rapture to a pile of scrap.

Fourth is I Corinthians 15:50-52: “...Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; neither does corruption inherit incorruption. Behold, I show you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be *changed*, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the LAST TRUMP: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.”

There is no proof—or even *hint*—of a rapture here! Notice the phrase “last trump.” This refers to the seventh trumpet, which announces Christ’s Return *to the whole world*. This last trumpet is also referred to in Revelation 11:15

and I Thessalonians 4:15-16. It sends a piercing—*immense*—and REVERBERATING—sound that *all* inhabitants of Earth will hear.

Notice this in Matthew: “And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall *all the tribes of the earth mourn*, and THEY SHALL SEE THE SON OF MAN [nothing secret here] COMING in the clouds of heaven with power and *great glory*. And He shall send His angels with a *great sound of a trumpet* [this has to be the last], and they shall gather together His elect

“True salvation is infinitely greater than going to heaven.”

from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other” (24:30-31). This references the saints wherever they are, either buried or alive on Earth. This becomes more clear.

Nothing “secret” is being described! This trumpet blast announces Christ’s Return, and it is *then* when He gathers His people. At this point, His true followers will be changed into perfect, immortal beings. This is the time of the Resurrection, when the “dead in Christ” are raised to spirit-born immortal life. They first meet Him in the clouds, not as a rapture—so that they can U-turn with Him back to heaven—but so they can return *with* Him to begin rule of the Earth. Get this!

The final passage is I Thessalonians 4:15-17: “For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a SHOUT, with the voice of the archangel, and with the TRUMP OF GOD [nothing secret here]: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: then we which are alive and remain shall be *caught up* together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air [not heaven]: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.” Where?

The prophet Zechariah answers: “And [Christ’s] feet shall stand in that day [not seven years later] upon the mount of Olives, which is before Jerusalem on the east...and the LORD my God *shall come* [recall John 14], and all the saints with [Him]” (14:4-5).

What could possibly be *plainer*?

These verses obviously describe Christ’s *only* additional Coming. To state He will return a secret additional time suggests He misrepresented His Second Coming to Earth! The rapture makes Jesus a *liar*—and the *perpetrator of confusion*!

The above supposed “proof texts” actually prove the *deceptiveness* of this doctrine!

“Astrape” and “Parousia”

Revelation 1:16 describes Christ’s appearance as “the sun [that] shines in [its] strength.” That is bright! Jesus Himself describes His Coming this way: “For as the *lightning* comes out of the east, and shines even unto the west; so shall also the *coming* of the Son of man be” (Matt. 24:27).

Two Greek words should be noted here. These are altered and misapplied by rapturists to change Jesus’ intended meaning.

“Lightning” comes from *astrape*, meaning “lightning,” “glare,” and “bright shining.” Would any suggest that people could not see lightning occurring *worldwide*? Some *do* suggest this about Christ’s Return, even though it is foretold to be as a GLARE and BRIGHT SHINING that goes from the east to the west.

The word translated “coming” is *parousia*, meaning “being near,” “coming,” and “presence.” Rapture supporters claim this does not really mean “coming,” but instead, a “*secret nearness*” or “*invisible presence*.” This is plain dishonesty with Scripture! Jesus said what He meant. Had He meant “secret nearness,” He would have said this to His disciples—and to all who would read ever after.

Parousia is used in many other scriptures. All of them (Matt. 24:3, 27, 37, 39; I Cor. 15:23, 16:17; II Cor. 7:6-7, 10:10; Phil. 1:26, 2:12; I Thes. 2:19,

3:13, 4:15) refer to the same meaning—not some mysterious “secret nearness.” Look them up. Remember, rapture theorists speak of Jesus’ *secret* Coming and His *visible* Coming. The secret one is fiction, fantasy, invention—PURE IMAGINATION. It may be real in its author’s minds, but it is not in the Bible.

Christ’s Second—*Final*—Coming

Recall that God’s Word reveals a future last fulfillment of the “abomination of desolation,” when a religious-political-economic-military force stops the daily sacrifices at the Temple in Jerusalem. Soon after, the Tribulation will strike the world—to the complete surprise of all its inhabitants. The apostle Paul wrote, “For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a *thief in the night*” (I Thes. 5:2). The apostle Peter underscored this: “But the day of the Lord will come as a *thief in the night...*” (II Pet. 3:10).

While no one knows when a thief is going to come, homeowners certainly do know when he has broken and entered their house. This worst time of trouble in history will last three and a half years—the duration of the reign of the Beast and False Prophet. No one will—or *could*—miss it.

Revelation 1:7 declares, “Behold, He *comes with clouds*; and *every eye shall SEE Him* [again, nothing secret here]...and *all kindreds of the earth shall wail* because of Him.” Also, how could anyone miss *such a verse*? It

practically screams off the page! Jesus further confirmed in Acts 1 that He will return in the clouds.

Sadly, most just do not read their Bibles, choosing to trust deceived ministers instead.

Let’s repeat from Matthew 24: “And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth *mourn* [this would be closely connected to wailing. Why? Notice...], and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (vs. 30). This should be *impossible* to misunderstand.

Now consider this powerful warning from Christ—and how it applies to the rapture: “Then if any man shall say unto you, Lo, here is Christ, or there; *believe it not*. For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets [what follows should sober you], and shall show great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect. Behold, I have told you before [this is then a repeated warning]. Wherefore if they shall say unto you, Behold, He is in the desert; go not forth: behold, He is in the *secret chambers*; believe it not. For as the *lightning comes out of the east*, and shines even *unto the west*; so shall *also the coming of the Son of man be*” (Matt. 24:23-27).

The events preceding Christ’s Return are certainly horrible to contemplate. How to get through them naturally engenders more than worry—

it begets great fear. So, it is also natural to want to *escape* what is coming. The rapture is merely a humanly devised path for escaping the horror of the Tribulation. The problem has always been that it is *not* what GOD says!

Jesus warned that many false teachers would arise. Deception about His Second Coming would not be an exception. Peter warned: “For we have not followed cunningly devised fables [the Greek means: a tale, fiction, myth], when we made known unto you the power and *coming* of our Lord Jesus Christ...” (II Pet. 1:16).

While this verse refers to accurately representing Christ’s *First* Coming, the principle applies to His Second. The rapture is a tale—a myth—aimed at giving what is false hope to the unwitting and unsuspecting!

Reject the fiction—and accept the TRUTH of what God *really* promises in your Bible.

You will want to read our booklet *Promised Protection – Secret Rapture or Place of Safety?* at rcg.org/gpp. You will be shocked at the passages that rapturists ignore!

Jesus Christ built His Church—the *true* Church—the only one He built—2,000 years ago. This Church believes and teaches the truths of the Bible—all of them—not human ideas—*any* of them! The people of *this* Church have always stood in the plain certainty of what God *does* promise for those alive at the end—not the false hope of human inventions. □



IS HEAVEN
YOUR REWARD?
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BRITAIN

Continued from page 7

Changing Times

The answer to why drunkenness is rampant in the UK is tied to the loss of the British Empire.

Recall that God promised to bless Ephraim because of Abraham's obedience alone. The British people did nothing to deserve it. God fulfilled His end of the covenant—Great Britain became the greatest empire of all time—and now He is withdrawing those blessings to accomplish a greater purpose.

Even as it was losing its empire, Britain remained a global political, financial and cultural leader. While it should have appreciated the blessings it had, its society began to decay: The consumer society of the 1950s gave way to the sexual revolution of the 60s, which produced the “me” decade of the 70s. From the 80s until today, life has become more about acquiring possessions, having a good time, and doing “whatever makes me feel good.”

This cultural climate bred today's “drunkards of Ephraim” attitude of widespread alcohol abuse.

The prominence afforded Britain—even without its colonies—should have been enough for it to continue as a banner of decorum and decency. Yet, by and large, it has squandered what it has been given.

Why? The UK no longer has a purpose. With its empire gone, it has lost its singular national focus. It used to take pride in spreading the cultural norms of decency, orderliness and virtue. But look at the image it has proudly exported since WWII: lewd television shows, punk rock, androgynous entertainers, a salacious tabloid culture—and, of course, drunkenness.

As Britain's society continues to spiral downward, it reaps what it sows.

What Is Coming

Yet it did not have to be this way! God repeatedly warns modern Ephraim throughout the Bible to turn from its sinful ways. He looks down and sees

alcohol abuse is rife throughout the land, which results in crime, violence, sickness, family breakdown, unhappiness and ultimately death.

The God of the Bible has a special relationship with the people of the United Kingdom: “Is Ephraim My dear son? Is he a pleasant child? For since I spoke against him, I do earnestly remember him still: therefore My bowels [the seat of emotions] are troubled for him; I will surely have mercy upon him, says the LORD” (Jer. 31:20).

God looks down and sees modern Ephraim, His “dear son,” in a sorry state: “But they also have erred through wine, and through strong drink are out of the way; the priest and the prophet have erred through strong drink, they are swallowed up of wine, they are out of the way through strong drink; they err in vision, they stumble in judgment.

“For all tables are *full of vomit and filthiness*, so that there is no place clean” (Isa. 28:7-8). How often does this describe a scene in modern Britain?

In order for God to have mercy on the British peoples, however, they must do what Abraham did in the Old Testament: obey God's commands.

The UK did not have to become the drunk man of Europe—more accurately, the DRUNK MAN OF THE WORLD. Throughout the 20th century, it was repeatedly warned to turn to the true God by the predecessor to this magazine, *The Plain Truth*. Through that publication, along with the power of television and radio, its editor-in-chief Herbert W. Armstrong showed Britain the error of its ways by relaying what God warned would happen if the nation did not repent and change.

That thundering warning fell on deaf ears, but it continues today through *The Real Truth* and the financial backer of this magazine, The Restored Church of God.

As a patient and merciful Being, God warns Britain *twice* of the direction it is going—both in

the 20th century and today. And as would any loving parent, He tells Britain that it is racing headlong toward national punishment.

Jeremiah 6:15 describes coming chastisement and why it will occur: “Were they ashamed when they had committed abomination?”—think of the drunken British revelers!—“No, THEY WERE NOT AT ALL ASHAMED, neither could they blush: therefore they shall fall among them that fall: at the time that I visit them they shall be cast down, says the LORD.”

The only way for the entire nation to avoid this time is for everyone to collectively get on their knees, repent—and live according to God's commandments!

Given that Britons have not changed their ways despite the obvious and widespread problems of drunkenness and their materialistic lifestyles, conditions will have to get much worse before the nation as a whole wakes up. Its people will have to learn painful lessons before they will listen to God's voice.

Yet individuals do not have to go through this if they turn to God and obey Him—including YOU. To do so, you must wholeheartedly follow Ezekiel 18: “Therefore I will judge you...every one according to his ways, says the Lord GOD. *Repent*, and turn yourselves from all your transgressions; so iniquity shall not be your ruin” (vs. 30).

The Bible has *much more* to say about both what is coming for modern Ephraim and Manasseh, as well as

how individuals can heed God's warnings now.

To learn more, read David C. Pack's thoroughly researched and eye-opening book *America and Britain in Prophecy* at rcg.org/aabibp. The information it contains can help you understand where world events are headed—and how you can change the path of your life for the better! □



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■ **VIOLENT AGE:** Left, a mother of 11 children who is six-months pregnant sits by a “sobia,” a traditional wood-powered stove at an unofficial refugee camp in Jabaa, Turkey (Dec. 20, 2014). Right, children make their way through the rubble of buildings in a devastated street in the northern Syrian city of Aleppo (Jan. 1, 2015).

PHOTOS: ANWAR AMRO/AFP/GETTY IMAGES (LEFT); BARAA AL-HALABI/AFP/GETTY IMAGES (RIGHT)

Urban agriculture—growing crops and keeping animals for food in and around cities—plays a larger part in food security than previously thought, the first comprehensive global study of food production in urban settings showed. More acreage of rice was grown in cities around the world—where 50 percent of the world’s population lives—than “the total area of rice farming in South Asia,” *BBC News* reported. □



The year 2014 was one of the worst for children, the United Nations Children’s Fund reported. Many were killed or became refugees in the Gaza conflict and Syrian war, fought as soldiers for armed groups in the Central African Republic, suffered hunger and homelessness in South Sudan, and died or became orphans as a result of the Ebola epidemic. □

Glyphosate, a primary ingredient in consumer-grade pesticides, has been linked to a large increase in chronic diseases in the United States, researchers from the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements reported. Widespread use of the chemical is believed to be contributing to the development of Parkinson’s, Alzheimer’s, autism, multiple sclerosis, cancer and diabetes, among other conditions. □



Only five northern white rhinoceroses are left in the world. According to *National Geographic*, “The remaining animals, all captive, include a female at the San Diego Zoo, a female in a zoo in the Czech Republic, and two females and a male at Kenya’s Ol Pejeta Conservancy, which is part of a last-ditch effort to breed the extremely rare subspecies.” □



Approximately 269,000 tons of plastic waste pollute the world’s oceans, according to data collected from 24 expeditions over six years through the non-profit organization 5 Gyres. It is considered the most scientifically rigorous estimate to date. □

Deaths from terrorism increased by 61 percent from 2012 to 2013, according to the Global Terrorism Index. About 80 percent of the attacks occurred in five countries—Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Nigeria and Pakistan. □

Approximately a million crimes in the United Kingdom are not included in police reports and therefore not investigated, a study by police watchdog group, Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary, reported. Violent crimes and sexual assaults were among those more frequently left out of official reports. □



A new dwarf galaxy, named KKs3, has been discovered near the Milky Way galaxy by a Russian-American team. According to the Royal Astronomical Society, which made the discovery, “its stars have only one ten-thousandth of the mass of the Milky Way.” □

Around 1,000 people—an average of 13 per day—have died in eastern Ukraine since the ceasefire between Ukraine and Russia due to violations on both sides, a United Nations report stated. □



Every nation in the world except China has crossed a “malnutrition red line,” a Global Nutrition Report stated. Many countries are striving to solve the problem of undernutrition, however, about half of the countries are also battling overnutrition, in which a person takes in more nutrients than they need, often resulting in obesity. □

ECONOMY & PERSONAL FINANCE

Why Are Gas Prices So Low?



■ **GLOBAL IMPACT:** Gasoline prices are displayed at a filling station in Fairlawn, Ohio (Jan. 4, 2015).

PHOTO: PAULA C. RONDEAU/THE REAL TRUTH

Since June 2014, gas prices throughout the world have rapidly decreased, with the price per barrel dropping from \$115 in June to below \$50 in January 2015.

Reuters reported that “Russia’s oil output hit a post-Soviet high last year, averaging 10.58 million barrels per day (bpd)...Iraq’s oil exports were at their highest since 1980 in December, an oil ministry spokesman said, with record sales from the country’s southern terminals.”

Usually a surplus is countered by a cut in production from other big oil producers to maintain the price of oil. Saudi Arabia, however, mandated that the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) continue to produce 30 million barrels per day, creating an even greater surplus and consequently forcing prices down.

As the world’s largest oil exporter, Saudi Arabia possesses significant control over OPEC. It has successfully blocked appeals for production cuts from OPEC’s poorer member countries such as Venezuela and Iran.

“From Riyadh the world looks a grim place, and the Saudis have a host of concerns that they feel are not being

addressed adequately, either by their allies in the West or by their partners in the region,” *BBC* reported.

Iran, Saudi Arabia’s rival, was most affected as oil exports account for 25 percent of its GDP. Lower prices reduce the profit Iran makes from the sale of its oil and make it less able to provide aid to other countries. Tehran is currently “paying to keep the Assad regime afloat in Syria,” *The Economist* reported.

Russia, which backs Iran, is also feeling the effects. The ruble has lost more than half its value.

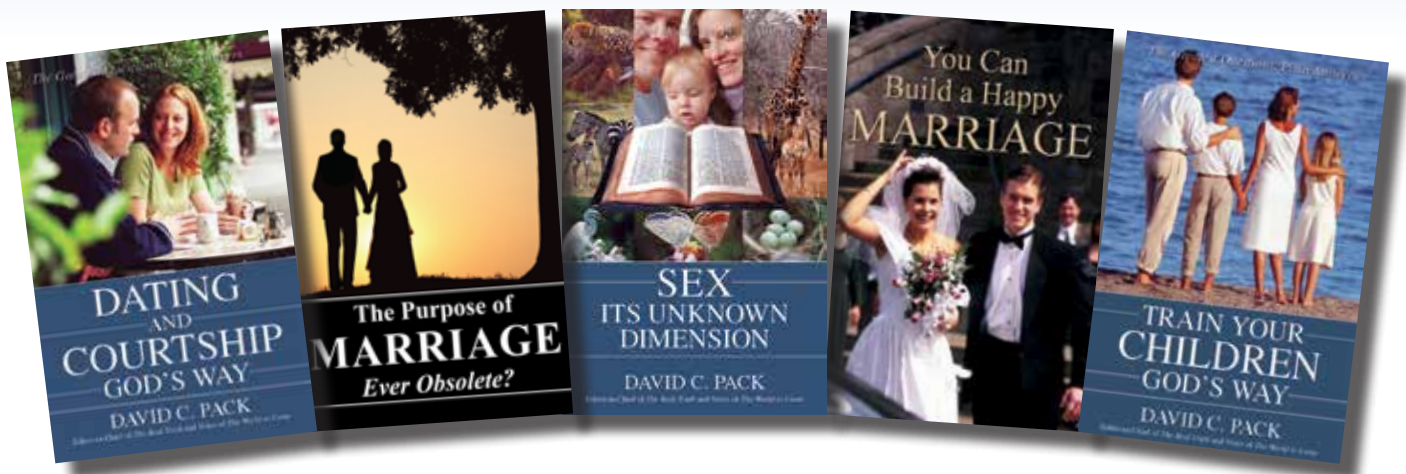
Saudi Arabia anticipates being able to handle the lower prices. *BBC* continued, “...the Kingdom sits on \$741 [billion] of currency reserves and posted a \$15 [billion] surplus at the end of last fiscal year, and the Saudis can absorb the cost of budget deficits for a few years if needs be.”

While the United States is experiencing lower gas prices, its economy has so far been generally unaffected. Within the past year, the U.S. has augmented internal oil production, which has resulted in decreased oil imports and a diminished effect of falling global oil prices. □



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