You Can Understand Bible Prophecy

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Why Prophecy?

Prophecy is an integral part of the Bible, God's inspired revelation to mankind. Through it God reveals Himself, His plan for humanity and why we are here.

We strive for security, long for stability and dream of a glowing and predictable future for ourselves and our posterity. But for most of us these hopes and desires are far from certain to be realized. Our world is filled with rapid and often perilous change.

We could easily fall victim to an accident, act of violence, debilitating disease or natural disaster. The turbulent winds of economic and social change threaten our financial stability. Wars and acts of terrorism threaten to endanger the fabric of society and make even more elusive the security we seek.

Uncertainty is a way of life.

No confidence

Consider today's youth. A lack of confidence in the future is a major cause of anxiety among teenagers. Thousands are convinced the good life will evaporate before they're old enough to enjoy it. They crave assurance and purpose. Nihilism—the absence of confidence and hope in anything—is epidemic. The staggering number of teen suicides illustrates their disillusionment. Some vent their anger and frustration by setting up an alternative society of gangs.

But teens aren't the only ones anxious about their future. Adults turn to psychics and astrological readings in unprecedented numbers, attempting to peer into the murkiness of the future. Books about the future are best sellers. Millions of people long for reassurance that some kind of light shines at the end of the tunnel. King Solomon's observation that "man is greatly troubled by ignorance of the future" (Ecclesiastes 8:7, Revised English Bible) holds true today.

Why is our world so uncertain? Have we no alternative? Is nothing predictable? Must we live in ignorance of our future? Can we discover a source for information about where this world is headed?

Indeed we can, and it tells us a great deal about what lies ahead. We can also know the cause of our uncertainty and the amazing turn of events that could change it for the better.

Where can we find answers?

The answers have been waiting for us all along. They're in the pages of the Holy Bible.

The Bible is unique among all literature. Though penned by many writers from varied cultures over a span of 15 centuries, it is the masterpiece of a single author, the Creator of the universe.

For centuries Bible students have marveled that so many writers, from strikingly dissimilar

backgrounds, could maintain the consistent message and purpose found in the pages of Scripture. No other compilation of writings from such varied authors could compare with the Bible's continuity and harmony.

This consistency gives the Bible unrivaled distinction among literary works. This constancy is one of the proofs of its divine inspiration. As the Bible itself powerfully proclaims about its origin: "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God" (2 Timothy 3:16, emphasis added throughout).

Much of this remarkable book is prophetic. Its prophecies reveal crucial information about the future of mankind. When we realize that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, then we begin to realize the significance of its prophecies. They are reliable because God Himself inspired them.

What does the Creator tell us about Himself and the future? "I am God, and there is none like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done … Indeed I have spoken it; I will also bring it to pass. I have purposed it; I will also do it" (Isaiah 46:9-11). God not only claims to reveal the future, He has the power to bring to pass what He has foretold!

The apostle Peter advises us to pay attention to the words of the biblical prophets: "And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed…knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:19-21).

The Prophet of prophets

A prophet is one through whom God speaks—one appointed to reveal the will of God to His people. One of the greatest of these prophets was God's own Son, Jesus Christ: "God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds" (Hebrews 1:1-2).

People seldom think of Jesus Christ as a prophet, but a prophet He was (Luke 13:33; 24:19; John 6:14). His message—"the gospel of the kingdom of God" (Mark 1:14)—is filled with prophecy. His message explains and clarifies the destiny of mankind, revealing the way God will accomplish His master plan.

The record of Jesus Christ's birth, life, ministry and death is one of history's most powerful confirmations of the reliability and accuracy of Bible prophecy.

Precise details about Jesus' birth, ministry and crucifixion were accurately foretold hundreds, even thousands, of years before He was born. Specific events and circumstances foretold centuries earlier came to pass exactly as the Hebrew prophets had predicted, providing compelling evidence of their credibility and substantiating the accuracy of their messages.

Could their words hold meaning for us today? Did you know those same prophets tell us what Jesus Christ has planned for the future—your future?

You probably already know that Jesus promised to return to earth. That promise is an excellent example of prophecy. He also promised to finish the work He began at His first coming.

Throughout the Bible the life and mission of the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, are depicted as examples of His devotion to the welfare of people. Many prophecies yet to be fulfilled are directly related to the future work and mission of Jesus Christ.

A right perspective

Many people regard prophecy as mystical, strange and unreal, with no relevance to their lives. They have almost no understanding of what prophecy is all about. Others, having encountered grossly distorted interpretations of Bible prophecy, have grown skeptical and disillusioned.

However, when properly understood, the Bible speaks with a clear, consistent and reliable message that is just as appropriate for us as it was for the people of ancient Israel.

Whether you are unsure of the value of the Bible's prophecies or regard them with deep respect, this booklet is meant to help you accurately understand prophecy. We want you to see the true scope of prophecy—how it links mankind's past, present and future. A knowledge of prophecy can provide you with a balanced perspective revealed by the Creator.

God's promises: the foundation of prophecy

Prophecy is not merely a series of unrelated predictions randomly scattered throughout the Bible. It has a structure; it is set on a firm foundation. To understand the foundation, we must realize the overall purpose of the Bible, its themes and the threads of its stories.

One overall theme is that the Bible is the tale of two families. The first is the family of Adam, the human father of all mankind. The second is the family of Abraham, the father of those who are faithful to God (Romans 4:9, 11). God regards people who become, in a spiritual sense, like faithful Abraham as His own personal family, His sons and daughters (2 Corinthians 6:18).

The Bible begins with the creation of the universe and a world fashioned to support Adam's, and then all humanity's, existence. The story of Scripture will not be complete until all of the descendants of Adam receive an eternal inheritance in refashioned heavens and earth or—if they unequivocally refuse God's way of loving others as themselves—eternal death in the final judgment (Revelation 20:14-15).

It is to Abraham and his descendants that God gave the promise of an eternal inheritance. Only members of the family of Adam whom God grafts into the family, or "seed," of Abraham (through the sacrificed Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth) may partake of that eternal inheritance (Galatians 3:29).

Between the creation of Adam and God's final judgment is the story of God's relationship with us, His creation. The Bible, in its account of Adam, explains the reason for our nature. It tells us how and why sin, evil and suffering entered the world and reveals God's solution to that problem. It reveals the purpose of our existence, explaining why God made human beings and the incredible future He has in store for us.

At the heart of God's plan for us are many amazing promises. In a greater sense, God offers us

one magnificent promise, which He first expressed to Adam and Eve and amplifies and expands throughout the Bible. God promises He will make available everything we need to establish and maintain an eternal relationship with Him as His children—that our salvation will always be His greatest concern.

Read on to learn how prophecy fills in the details of God's wonderful plan for humanity. You will discover the reason people suffer and the lessons they should learn from it. You will see that God, who inspired prophecy, cares for people—that He has designed a logical and realistic master plan for solving the suffering and dilemmas that (as history well shows) we cannot resolve on our own.

You will also learn why the life, work and mission of Jesus, as the Messiah, was planned even "before time began" (2 Timothy 1:9)—and why His continuing efforts are crucial to the success of God's plan and purpose for our future.

Come with us on a journey to explore and understand Bible prophecy.

The Fundamentals of Bible Prophecy

Bible prophecy is built around a framework of specific principles and themes. Knowing them is key to unlocking a proper understanding of Bible prophecy.

Why did God inspire the writers of Scripture to record prophecies? Could it be because prophecy reveals not only how but why God intervenes in the affairs of man? After all, prophecy discloses many details of God's great design. It explains God's actions in human affairs and how they relate to His revealed plan.

Let's first examine prophetic principles and themes. These fundamentals serve as keys that unlock the enigmas of prophecy. They make it possible for us to understand many aspects of prophecy that otherwise appear isolated and unrelated and to see how they fit together like pieces of a puzzle.

1. The role of the Messiah

God inspired much of prophecy to relate to the first and second appearances of Jesus as the Messiah. Prophecy explains the necessity of both His first and second comings in God's plan for mankind.

The apostles often referred to prophecies Jesus had already fulfilled to prove that He was the Messiah. But they also often spoke of His second coming. It is only natural for us to wonder about the prophecies that concern His second appearing—advance news that could affect our own lives, including perhaps our immediate future.

Therefore, the first important key to an understanding of biblical prophecy is to recognize that almost all prophecy directly relates to the intervention in human affairs of one key player: Jesus the Messiah. (The words Messiah and Christ are from the Hebrew and Greek languages, respectively. Both mean "Anointed One," one who is divinely chosen.)

Though not specifically mentioned in every prophetic passage, the Messiah is the central figure of prophecy. In fact, a major purpose of prophecy is to reveal the mission of the Messiah.

Jesus made this clear to His disciples after His resurrection: "Then He said to them, 'These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me.' And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures" (Luke 24:44-45).

Without knowledge of Christ's role in these prophecies, His disciples could not understand them. Most prophecies pertaining to the future point directly or indirectly to the mission and work of Jesus the Messiah.

2. The Kingdom of God : focus of prophecy

The prophetic focus of Jesus Christ's mission is the Kingdom of God. During His earthly ministry "Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God" (Luke 8:1, New International Version). After His resurrection He came back to His apostles and "presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3).

The Kingdom of God—the focus of Christ's message—is a major focus of prophecy. Almost all biblical prophecy is, in some way, related to the setting up of His rule and authority over humanity in the literal kingdom He will establish on earth.

The prophet Daniel explained that "the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed;...it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever" (Daniel 2:44). In a parable Jesus compared Himself with a "nobleman [who] went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and to return" (Luke 19:12).

In a vision, Daniel saw how Jesus will receive that world-ruling Kingdom: "I was watching in the night visions, and behold, One like the Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days...Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom the one which shall not be destroyed" (Daniel 7:13-14).

The apostle John tells us that when the last of seven prophetic trumpets sounds, a triumphant announcement will be heard: "The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!" (Revelation 11:15). Jesus Christ instructed every Christian to pray to God: "Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Luke 11:2).

The return of Jesus Christ to establish the Kingdom of God will mark the beginning of the end of the many life-threatening problems the biblical prophets described. This exciting message of hope is a dominant theme in the writings of the prophets of God.

3. God's objective: mankind's redemption and salvation

Another purpose of prophecy is to urge repentance and offer everyone forgiveness through Jesus Christ's suffering and death. This focus on bringing all people to repentance permeates the prophecies of the Bible.

Jesus Himself said, "Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Luke 24:46-47).

Through the prophet Isaiah, God reveals the fundamental problem that needs solving: "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me" (Isaiah 29:13, NIV).

God describes people as having "heart[s] of stone"—an unyielding attitude toward Him and His instruction. This hardheartedness leads us to lives of selfishness—of greed, envy and hatred—

which bring us ever closer to the brink of destruction.

Bible prophecy, however, reveals how God will ultimately deal with this problem: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them" (Ezekiel 36:26-27).

Prophecy explains God's plan to bring this change of heart—otherwise known as repentance and conversion—to all people and solve the root problems that threaten to destroy us. So far only a few have repented and allowed their hearts to be converted through the power of God's Spirit. The rest of humanity must yet be brought to repentance and this change of heart.

To better understand prophecy, we must realize that, although God inspired the historically fulfilled and future aspects of prophecy for the benefit of all people, most people's hearts have not changed. Their attitude and actions reflect a hardened "heart of stone" (see Ezekiel 36:26 and Romans 8:7). To understand God's dealings with humanity, we must not overlook this fact.

The Bible likens God's relationship to mankind to that of a father with his children. Children often disobey their fathers, rebelling against them and choosing actions that disappoint and at times even anger them. But that doesn't lessen a father's patience, hope and love for his children. Keeping this perspective in mind helps us understand biblical prophecies of God, as our Heavenly Father, relating to and interacting with us as His children.

4. Specific dates are rare

Bible prophecy analyzes the past and provides a vision of the future (Isaiah 46:9-10). It often reveals specific events and sequences of events. But rarely does it reveal the exact time when events will occur.

It is only natural that we want to know when and how prophecies will come to pass. Christ's disciples were no exception. When He appeared to them after His resurrection, they asked Him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel ?" He answered, "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority" (Acts 1:6-7, NIV).

The principle reflected here holds true for most prophecies. God seldom reveals the specific times of their fulfillment. It is not God's purpose that we know the exact time of the fulfillment of most prophecies. He wants us to recognize the many prophecies that have already been fulfilled. Their fulfillment assures us that God's promises are accurate and reliable.

Christ's disciples asked on another occasion, "When will these things be?" (Matthew 24:3). Jesus listed several trends that have continued from His day down to our own—religious deception, wars, famines, uncontrollable disease epidemics and devastating earthquakes and storms. "All these things must come to pass," He advised, "but the end is not yet" (verse 6). He did not give them a specific sign that would herald His coming. Rather, He stressed the need to "take heed"—to be spiritually alert and on guard—that they should not be deceived (verse 4).

Only the Father knows the precise time of His Son's return. Yet we can understand important prophecies and prophetic principles that give clear indication His return is imminent. For example, the prophet Daniel asked an angel to explain certain end-time prophecies that had

been revealed to him. "Go your way, Daniel," the angel responded, "for the words are closed up and sealed till the time of the end" (Daniel 12:6-9).

This scripture and others indicate that the time of the end will be discernable to God's people, though likely not until that time begins. A number of specific prophecies will be fulfilled in the period leading up to and including unparalleled world trouble lasting 3 1/2 years (in biblical language, "a time [a year], times [two years, the smallest plural being implied by the lack of specificity] and half a time [half a year]," verse 7), which will conclude with the establishment of God's Kingdom on earth.

5. Duality in Bible prophecy

Prophetic statements sometimes apply to more than one fulfillment, a principle we could call duality. A prime example of duality is Christ's first coming to atone for our sins and His second coming to rule as King of Kings.

Also, the Bible speaks of someone's descendants as his "seed." In some passages the word seed implies both an individual (the Messiah) and multiple descendants (people of Israelitish descent).

Such dual themes are common in Scripture. The apostle Paul, for example, wrote about "the first man Adam [becoming] a living being" and "the last Adam [Jesus Christ] [becoming] a life-giving spirit" (1 Corinthians 15:45). Paul noted that physical circumcision was evidence of God's covenant with Abraham's offspring, but God defined spiritual circumcision—a converted heart—as the key to a Christian's relationship with God (Romans 2:27-28). Paul wrote of the spiritually circumcised—the Church, rather than a physical race of people—as being the "Israel of God" (Galatians 6:16).

Jesus specifically alluded to the dual application of some prophecies in Matthew 17:11-12. Asked about the prophecy of "Elijah," who would precede the coming of the Messiah (Malachi 4:5), Jesus responded: "Indeed, Elijah is coming first and will restore all things. But I say to you that Elijah has come already." The disciples understood that the "Elijah" who had come already was John the Baptist (verse 13). But Christ's clear implication was that another "Elijah" would precede His second coming, announcing His return just as John the Baptist preceded Christ's first coming.

Another prophecy with dual application is Jesus' Olivet prophecy (Matthew 24; Mark 13; Luke 21), so named because He gave it on the Mount of Olives, overlooking Jerusalem. Many conditions described in this prophecy existed in the days leading up to the Romans' siege and destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. But Christ makes it clear that similar conditions would prevail shortly before His return.

In the Olivet prophecy, Jesus spoke of an "abomination of desolation." Daniel's prophecy about the abomination of desolation was fulfilled in 167 B.C. by Antiochus Epiphanes, but Jesus pointed out that the prophecy would have a future fulfillment (see The Coming 'Abomination of Desolation').

We must carefully examine the context of prophecies to understand their meaning and discern whether the prophecy seems incomplete after its first fulfillment. It is equally important to avoid

reading duality into passages that do not support such interpretation. We should take great care to properly discern whether duality is a factor in any particular prophecy.

We should also understand that virtually all interpretations of how prophecies may be fulfilled are speculative to some degree, and often we may recognize a prophecy's fulfillment only after it is well underway or already has taken place.

6. Cause and effect in prophecy

Another fundamental principle applicable to Bible prophecy is the correlation of cause and effect. The principle of cause and effect is often implicit in foretelling events. Human nature is quite predictable, especially to God, who made us and knows how we think. Therefore, God can foretell broad trends—and resulting disasters—based on His understanding of cause and effect. Expressed another way, God allows people to reap what they sow (Galatians 6:7-8) individually and, many times, collectively. He does this for our long-term benefit.

Many of the calamities that come on people are the consequence of their own sins and hostilities toward each other. The prophet Jeremiah well expressed this principle: "Your own wickedness will correct you, and your backslidings will reprove you" (Jeremiah 2:19). However, God sometimes exercises control over the consequences of human activities and conflicts to accomplish His objectives. At times He dramatically intervenes to alter the course of history. His actions—including personal and collective punishments—are tools He uses to accomplish a greater purpose.

God spoke of the cause-and-effect principle to Moses when He gave ancient Israel His law. He inspired Moses to warn Israel: "Beware that you do not forget the Lord your God by not keeping His commandments ... [lest] when your heart is lifted up ... you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gained me this wealth'... Then it shall be, if you by any means forget the Lord your God, ... you shall surely perish. As the nations which the Lord destroys before you, so you shall perish, because you would not be obedient to the voice of the Lord your God" (Deuteronomy 8:11-20).

Here God told the people of Israel that their future would be determined by their choices. This was prophecy, but it was prophecy predicated on people's decisions. If the Israelites chose to obey God and acknowledge that their blessings came from Him, they would receive His blessings and protection. But if they forgot God and disobeyed Him, they would suffer the consequences that befall all disobedient people.

Later, in two of the five books of Moses, as revealed in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28, God offered examples of the blessings He bestows on people who choose to obey Him. He also lists the devastating consequences they will incur if they disobey Him.

Take the time to study these two chapters. If you carefully examine them you will greatly increase your understanding of cause and effect in regards to Bible prophecies. These passages illustrate God's blessings for obedience and punishment for disobedience. They establish the basis for most of the later prophetic indictments and punishments that God pronounces on Israel and other peoples.

The underlying principle is simple: God ultimately, if not immediately, reacts to people's

behavior. People of all nations determine much of their own future by how they respond to God and His instruction. King David noted this when he wrote, "The nations have fallen into the pit they have dug; their feet are caught in the net they have hidden" (Psalm 9:15, NIV).

Once we comprehend that God's response to people can be based on the principle of cause and effect—blessings for obedience and calamities for disobedience—many of the misconceptions and mysteries about prophecy disappear. Other aspects of prophecy become much easier to comprehend.

7. Prophecy's greater context

Prophecy is not given or fulfilled in a vacuum. Prophecy provides us far more than a simple list of predictions. It analyzes attitudes and behavior—past, present and future—and reveals God's perspective and reactions. We cannot correctly understand Bible prophecy without some knowledge of the background of the period and culture of the prophet who utters any particular prophecy.

The Bible reveals the origin of the human race and its ethnic divisions (Acts 17:24-26; Deuteronomy 32:7-8). It records the rise and fall of empires and reveals reasons for their successes and their downfalls. It explains the origin of sin and its effect on history. These factors are essential background information to coming to an understanding of prophecy.

Prophetic books such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel are filled with history that includes analysis of conditions existing at the time they were written. They contain instruction, correction, warnings and pleas for change. They present options, sometimes vividly explaining potential consequences.

Prophecy cannot be separated from history. It reflects the far-reaching perspective of the Bible. An accurate biblical worldview requires an understanding of God's view of the history of the world and how He influences it.

We need to recognize that God intervenes in the affairs of men to fulfill His purpose. But it is just as important that we understand His perspective. This places prophecy in its proper context.

Prophecy out of context is easy to misinterpret. This is why irrational interpretations of prophecy have abounded throughout the centuries.

8. This is Satan's age, not God's

Another key to Bible prophecy is an understanding of the role and effect of Satan the devil. His influence over the world is so pervasive that Paul called him "the god of this age" (2 Corinthians 4:4). An understanding of Satan's influence is necessary if we are to understand prophecy. The devil exerts a powerful influence over human affairs.

The Bible contrasts "this age" of Satan's rule with "the age to come" (Matthew 12:32; Ephesians 1:21). As Paul explained, Christians must in this age struggle "against all the various Powers of Evil that hold sway in the Darkness around us, against the Spirits of Wickedness on high"

(Ephesians 6:12, Twentieth Century New Testament). The past century alone has witnessed many evil rulers influenced by the prince of darkness. The apostle John tells us that Satan "leads the whole world astray" (Revelation 12:9, NIV) and "the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one" (1 John 5:19).

Before God created the heavens and earth, He made angels. An angel of high position chose to become an adversary to God and was therefore renamed Satan, which in Hebrew means "adversary." Revelation 12:4 indicates that Satan (called a dragon here and in verse 9) drew a third of the angels into rebellion. The angels who follow him are demons, the evil forces Paul warns us about.

The "age to come" (Mark 10:30; Luke 18:30) will be free of Satan's influence. God let the apostle John see in vision "the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan," being seized and bound for 1,000 years "so that he would deceive the nations no more, until the thousand years were ended" (Revelation 20:2-3, New Revised Standard Version).

The imprisonment of Satan begins the prophesied age to come, when "the kingdoms of this world ... [will] become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ" in the Kingdom of God (Revelation 11:15).

With the devil bound, the world will experience peace under Christ's rule. "Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and for ever" (Isaiah 9:7, NIV).

9. The destiny of man

God created man to rule over His creation, to supervise everything, including every living creature. "So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. Then God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth'" (Genesis 1:27-28).

Eventually God will greatly extend that rule, as the book of Hebrews explains in expounding on Psalm 8: "'What are human beings that you [God] are mindful of them, or mortals, that you care for them? You have made them for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned them with glory and honor, subjecting all things under their feet.' Now in subjecting all things to them, God left nothing outside their control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to them" (Hebrews 2:6-8, NRSV).

Amazing as it may seem, God desires to place everything He has created under our control, in harmony with His will as our Creator. But, in our present human state, that is impossible. Remember, though, that Jesus Christ was also a human being. He was once in the flesh just as we are. Today He shares power over everything in the universe with our Heavenly Father (Matthew 28:18)

The time will come when Christ will share His authority with all who become the immortal children of God. He promises us, "To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne" (Revelation 3:21).

Our Heavenly Father also tells us, "He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be My son" (Revelation 21:7). This is the destiny God promises to everyone who surrenders his will to Him.

To properly understand prophecy, we should familiarize ourselves with these biblical concepts. Now let's take a look at God's promises and the covenants on which all biblical prophecy is based.

Jesus Christ's Life and Death in Prophecy

Many are vaguely aware that Jesus Christ's birth, life and death were prophesied in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament. But few are aware of the sheer number of prophecies and the astonishingly precise details foretold up to thousands of years in advance. These provide a powerful confirmation of the accuracy of Bible prophecy.

The Jewish New Testament lists 52 prophecies fulfilled in Christ's birth, life and death as stated in 81 passages in the Old Testament (David Stern, pp. xxv-xxix). In many ways the Old Testament pointed forward to Christ's first and second comings. All the Messianic Prophecies of the Bible discusses not only hundreds of specific prophecies, but many events, people, rituals and sacrifices in the Hebrew Scriptures that foreshadowed the life, death, ministry and return of Jesus Christ (Herbert Lockyer, 1973).

What were some of the prophecies Jesus fulfilled? Let's notice a few:

• He would be a descendant of King David (Isaiah 11:1-5; Matthew 1:1, 6).

• He would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2; Matthew 2:1).

• One would precede Him who would announce His coming (Isaiah 40:3, 5; Malachi 3:1; Matthew 3:1-3).

• His own people would reject Him (Isaiah 53:3; John 1:11).

• A friend would betray Him (Psalm 41:9; John 13:18-30).

• The price for His betrayal would be 30 pieces of silver (Zechariah 11:12; Matthew 26:15).

• The 30 pieces of silver would buy a potter's field (Zechariah 11:13; Matthew 27:3-10).

• Wicked people would pierce His hands and feet (Psalm 22:16; Luke 23:33; 24:38-40).

• He would suffer execution but without the breaking of any of His bones (Psalm 34:20; John 19:33-36).

• Others would cast lots for His garments (Psalm 22:18; John 19:23-24).

• He would be buried with the wealthy (Isaiah 53:9; Matthew 27:57-60).

• God would resurrect Him from the grave (Psalm 16:10; Acts 2:30-32).

Jesus Himself could not have controlled how these prophecies were fulfilled. No one can control the circumstances of His own birth, who his ancestors are and where he is born. Nor could He control the actions of others in betraying Him, putting Him to death and laying His body in the unused tomb of a wealthy man. Yet the prophets had written these remarkable details in advance up to 1,000 years earlier, foretelling precise details of Christ's death by crucifixion long before this became common as a method of execution.

The four Gospels abound with accounts of how many messianic prophecies were fulfilled, but Christ's closest followers didn't recognize their fulfillment at the time. Only in hindsight were they able to recognize many prophecies recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures and how they had been fulfilled.

Many prophecies regarding Jesus Christ are yet to be fulfilled. The Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy lists more than 200 prophecies of the Messiah, most of which are yet to come to pass (Barton Payne, 1996, pp. 665-670). Just as the many precise details of Christ's birth, life, death and resurrection came to pass exactly as foretold, so will the many prophecies that relate to His second coming be fulfilled exactly as spelled out in God's Word.

Promise and Covenants: A Prophetic Legacy

Many crucial Bible prophecies begin with one individual and his descendants. What promises will God fulfill through the family of Abraham?

Prophecy begins with a promise God made in the Garden of Eden. Immediately after "that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan" (Revelation 12:9) lured Adam and Eve into committing their first sin, God said to Satan, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel" (Genesis 3:15).

Here is one of the first and most far-reaching prophecies—the promise that God will rectify the problem of deception and sin brought on by Satan. He promised that from Eve, the first person to be deceived, would come a "Seed"—a descendant—who would "bruise" (crush) Satan's position of rulership (his "head") over humanity by which he deceives the world.

God revealed that the "seed" of Satan—people under his influence —would be hostile toward the "Seed" God had promised through the woman. Satan would succeed in temporarily disabling (like a severe bruise on the heel) the Seed promised by God.

Thousands of years later, the life and work of that promised Seed were indeed interrupted, as God foretold, for three days and three nights by the crucifixion of Jesus Christ (Matthew 12:40).

On that foundational promise—that God would send a Seed, the Son of Man, as humanity's Redeemer to defeat Satan—stands a series of other promises God gave to His servants down through the ages. Collectively these promises—each amplifying and expanding the original promise—form the basis of Bible prophecy.

Later God promised Abraham that "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). That blessing was to come through Abraham's seed (Genesis 22:18). Centuries after Abraham, the apostle Paul wrote: "Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, 'And to seeds,' as of many, but as of one, 'And to your Seed,' who is Christ" (Galatians 3:16). Through Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah, all nations on earth are to be blessed.

The legacy of two families

Adam, the natural, physical father of the human race, responded to Satan's deceptive influence through Eve and chose to trust his personal judgment rather than follow God's instruction. In contrast to Adam, "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness" (James 2:23; Genesis 15:6). Therefore, God chose Abraham as the human father of another family, a spiritually oriented family of believers, that would accept and obey God's instruction.

That family would be composed first of Abraham's natural descendants through his son Isaac (Genesis 21:12). Later, a more important function of that family would begin through another descendant, Jesus, the promised Messiah (Galatians 3:29; Romans 8:16-18). Through Him,

Abraham is "the father of all those who believe" (Romans 4:11).

Finally, God has promised, through the second coming of the Messiah, to give the members of this spiritual family eternal life in His Kingdom.

Dual promises

Along with the promise that a Seed of Abraham would become the Messiah came a promise of greatness for the descendants of Abraham. This promise is to the natural seed of Abraham. In other words, God's promises to Abraham are dual. They contain implications both physical (to the descendants of Abraham) and spiritual (to the followers of Christ). Both are integral to the success of God's master plan for the human race.

God told Abraham, "Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession" (Genesis 17:8; compare 12:7; 24:7).

This was only the beginning. Many nations would develop from Abraham's descendants. For that reason God changed his name from Abram to Abraham: "No longer shall your name be called Abram ['exalted father'], but your name shall be Abraham ['father of a multitude']; for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you" (Genesis 17:5).

God did increase Abraham's family. However, He waited until Abraham and his wife Sarah were so old that they would not normally bear children. Then, miraculously, Isaac was born. Eventually all who will be considered Abraham's descendants must be miraculously "born" (John 3:3) into the Kingdom of God . Isaac was a type, a forerunner, of things to come (Romans 9:6-9).

Isaac fathered two sons, Esau and Jacob. God chose Jacob, the younger one, to receive the physical promises He gave to Abraham. God similarly chooses those to whom He offers the opportunity to be among the spiritual descendants of Abraham and receive the fulfillment of the eternal, spiritual promises (Romans 9:10-11). God places conditions, of course. All must first come to understand His revealed truth, then repent of their sins (1 Timothy 2:3-4; 2 Peter 3:9).

God changed Jacob's name to Israel (Genesis 32:28). From his 12 sons sprang the 12 tribes of Israel, which God delivered from Egyptian bondage under the leadership of Moses. God gave the Israelites the land of Canaan, just as He had promised Abraham. Later, in the days of Saul and David, He established the Israelites as a kingdom.

But God did not limit His promise of greatness for the descendants of Abraham to the territory He had allotted to the ancient kingdom of Israel in the land of Canaan . God promised that Abraham would "surely become a great and mighty nation" (Genesis 18:18). Paul tells us that God gave Abraham "the promise that he would be the heir of the world" (Romans 4:13).

God confirmed this ultimate expansion of Abraham's inheritance to Abraham's grandson, Jacob: "The land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants. Also your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread abroad to the west and the east, to the north and the south; and in you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis

28:13-14).

Eventually this continual expansion in all directions would embrace the whole earth. God would graft all peoples as His children into Abraham's family.

Gentiles grafted onto Israel

How does this happen? Through Jesus Christ both physical Israelites and non-Israelites may receive the promises made to Abraham. Paul explains: "Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth … were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ" (Ephesians 2:11-13, NIV).

Anyone who is not a natural-born descendant of Abraham can nevertheless become an heir to the inheritance promised to Abraham's family. Regardless of lineage, all can become part of the spiritual "Israel of God" through Christ (Galatians 6:15-16). To be partakers of those promises, they must be grafted into the family of Israel.

Paul compares this to grafting a wild olive shoot onto a domesticated olive tree: "But if some of the branches were broken off [referring to Israelites being cut off for disobedience], and you, a wild olive shoot [gentiles], were grafted in their place to share the rich root of the olive tree, do not boast over the branches. If you do boast, remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you" (Romans 11:17-18, NRSV).

Then Paul warns the gentiles whom God grafts onto Israel not to feel superior to Israelites who have not yet accepted Jesus as the Messiah and Savior. "You will say, 'Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.' That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand only through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe. For if God did not spare the natural branches, perhaps he will not spare you" (verses 19-21, NRSV).

Israel must be redeemed

Extending the promises from Abraham's physical descendants to spiritual believers began shortly after Christ's death and resurrection. Jesus' own countrymen rejected Him and refused to accept Him as the Messiah (Matthew 21:42-43; Luke 17:25), so the message of Jesus as the Messiah was extended to the gentiles. Soon many gentiles became part of the "Israel of God," the Church (Galatians 6:15-16).

But Abraham's physical descendants are not permanently alienated from God. They are redeemed and reconciled to Him. Paul explains the role they play in God's plan. "They are Israelites," he writes, "and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah" (Romans 9:4-5, NRSV).

Paul continues: "Has God rejected his [Israelite] people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected his people

whom he foreknew" (Romans 11:1-2, NRSV).

Paul then addresses the Israelites' present spiritual blindness: "Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened, as it is written, 'God gave them a sluggish spirit, eyes that would not see and ears that would not hear, down to this very day'" (verses 7-8, NRSV).

"So I ask, have they stumbled so as to fall? By no means! But through their stumbling [over Christ, their 'stone of stumbling'; 1 Peter 2:7-8] salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous [in the future]. Now if their stumbling means riches for the world, and if their defeat means riches for Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean!" (Romans 11:11-12).

Did you grasp the significance of Paul's words? Most descendants of Israel continue to reject Jesus as the Messiah. But God has not rejected them. They will be included in the redemption process of the Messiah when He returns as King of Kings. Understanding this truth is essential if we are to understand prophecies pertaining to the people of Israel at the end of the present evil age.

Admittance into the eternal inheritance promised to Abraham—for Israelites and gentiles alike—is possible only through the Messiah. "And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:29). "Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all" (Romans 4:16, NIV).

Birthright and scepter

We have noted a duality in God's promises to Abraham. Although some aspects of the promises relate to an eternal inheritance through the Messiah, others concern a national and material inheritance. The fulfillment of these promises was passed on to Isaac and then to Jacob (whom God renamed Israel).

Shortly before Jacob's death, God inspired him to reveal to his 12 sons the manner in which the physical heritage of Abraham would affect the generations of Israel. "And Jacob called his sons and said, 'Gather together, that I may tell you what shall befall you in the last days'" (Genesis 49:1). Jacob explained what would happen to each of his son's descendants—the 12 tribes of Israel.

Significantly, the core promises God made to Abraham were to pass to only Joseph and Judah. To each came a different promise, a separate heritage.

The Bible summarizes: "Though Judah became prominent among his brothers and a ruler came from him, yet the birthright belonged to Joseph" (1 Chronicles 5:2, NRSV).

Because of that birthright promise, Joseph's descendants would enjoy inconceivable prosperity —possessing the finest material blessings—and achieve great military superiority because the hand of God would be with them. They would increase greatly, colonizing beyond their borders like branches growing over a wall (Genesis 49:22-26).

To Judah and his descendants, however, went the promise of a scepter—a staff held by a king as the emblem of his sovereignty. It signified that from Judah would come a dynasty of kings that would culminate in the reign of the Messiah.

Jacob explained that "the scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet" (Genesis 49:10, New American Standard Bible). The promises to Abraham concerning rulership, salvation and the Messiah would be fulfilled through the Jewish people, the descendants of Judah. Jesus Himself said that "salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22). That is why He had to be born into a Jewish family as a physical descendant of Judah (Matthew 1:1-16; Luke 3:23-38).

Promises to David

Long after Abraham, through King David of the tribe of Judah, the scepter promise finally took on even greater significance. God gave David the kingdom of Israel and promised that from him would spring a dynasty of kings that would continue forever.

God sent the prophet Nathan to David with this message: "Thus says the Lord of hosts … I will make for you a great name … I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body … I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever…and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever" (2 Samuel 7:8-16, NRSV).

God did indeed establish a dynasty of kings through David. God promised that a greater future King would come from David's descendants. He sent an angel to Mary who told her: "You will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1:31-33).

The kingdom over which Jesus Christ will rule is to last forever. He will establish that kingdom when He returns to earth. Understanding that truth is of primary importance if we are to comprehend the messages of the prophets who followed David.

David's kingdom divided

At David's death his kingdom passed to his son Solomon. God gave Solomon great wisdom and wealth, but in his old age he allowed his many foreign wives and concubines to turn his heart away from God (1 Kings 11:1-8). The kingdom lapsed into worship of false gods.

Shortly after Solomon's death, God divided the kingdom He had given David into two nations. The tribes of Judah, Benjamin and some of Levi remained loyal to Solomon's son, Rehoboam, preserving David's dynasty. This much smaller kingdom was known as Judah or the house of Judah. It retained Jerusalem as its capital.

Ten tribes—the majority of the nation—seceded and retained the name Israel, eventually establishing Samaria, in the territory of Ephraim , as its capital. (Years later this northern Israelite kingdom was conquered and taken into captivity by ancient Assyria. Its people

disappeared from recorded history, becoming known as "the lost 10 tribes.")

The division of the kingdom separated the scepter promise from the birthright promise. Judah retained the scepter and the throne of David.

The tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, the direct descendants of Joseph, dominated the northern kingdom and retained the birth-right. The birthright and scepter promises then followed separate paths until the kingdom of Judah was toppled by the Babylonians and the Jewish throne was transferred to Israel in a distant land. And ultimately the house of Israel and the house of Judah will one day be reunited as one nation under the rule of the Messiah.

A reunited kingdom

The restoration of Israel as one nation under the rule of Christ is a theme that appears in the writings of many of the prophetic Bible books. That reunion will occur shortly after Jesus Christ's return as King of Kings. Notice God confirming, through Ezekiel, that Israel and Judah will be reunited as one people:

"Thus says the Lord God: I will take the people of Israel from the nations among which they have gone, and will gather them from every quarter, and bring them to their own land. I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel; and one king shall be king over them all. Never again shall they be two nations, and never again shall they be divided into two kingdoms. They shall never again defile themselves with their idols and their detestable things, or with any of their transgressions. I will save them from all the apostasies into which they have fallen, and will cleanse them. Then they shall be my people, and I will be their God.

"My servant David shall be king over them; and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall follow my ordinances and be careful to observe my statutes. They shall live in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob, in which your ancestors lived; they and their children and their children's children shall live there forever; and my servant David shall be their prince forever" (Ezekiel 37:21-25, NRSV).

God had promised David that his kingdom would last forever. When the world sees these two divisions reuniting under the rule of Jesus Christ, it will know that the Eternal God keeps His promises.

Speaking of the reunited people of Israel, God continues: "I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; and I will bless them and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary among them forevermore. My dwelling place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (verses 26-27, NRSV).

God confirmed many of His promises through special covenants, beginning with Abraham. "On the same day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying: 'To your descendants I have given this land'" (Genesis 15:18).

Later the Israelites bound themselves and their descendants to God as His special servants. God told them: "If you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people" (Exodus 19:5). They responded, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do" (verse 8). This agreement was in essence a marriage covenant between

God and the people (Jeremiah 3:20; 31:32).

The purpose of covenants

Every biblical prophet from the time of Moses forward used this covenant as the standard for evaluating and judging the behavior of God's chosen people. Each judged the Israelites by whether they were faithful to their covenant with God.

God's covenants all have the same purpose. They define the relationship parameters between Him and the recipients of His covenant. They explain what He requires of His people if they are to continue to receive His blessings, or benefits of His promises. They set the obligations His people must meet to continue receiving His favor, or grace.

A covenant is a pact between the people and God. Those who break that covenant lose God's favor—the blessing of His grace. The degree to which God gives His people favor is based on their compliance with His covenants.

The covenant God made with ancient Israel is especially significant in Bible prophecy. It documents, in great detail, the conditions Israel had to meet to stay in God's favor.

Although the Ten Commandments summarized Israel's central obligation to God, the people were obligated to obey all of His instructions. God promised: "If you diligently obey the voice of the Lord your God, to observe carefully all His commandments which I command you today…the Lord your God will set you high above all nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, because you obey the voice of the Lord your God" (Deuteronomy 28:1-2).

In the subsequent 12 verses God listed the marvelous blessings of physical prosperity Israel would receive.

But the agreement did not end there. God also spelled out the consequences that would befall the Israelites if they rejected the conditions of His covenant: "But if you will not obey the Lord your God by diligently observing all his commandments and decrees, which I am commanding you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you" (Deuteronomy 28:15, NRSV). The remainder of this chapter describes what would happen to them if they ignored or rejected their covenant with God.

Stable foundation for prophecy

God's promises and covenants—especially the promise of blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience that are included in His covenant with Israel—provide the foundation for biblical prophecy.

Let's now look at the specific work and messages of God's prophets, men such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel. Let's learn why they committed their prophecies to writing. Few people understand the importance of their prophecies to a blinded world.

God Confirms His Credibility to the World

Can we believe Bible prophecy? Through the examples of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, God gave unmistakable proof that His prophecies are sure.

What is a prophet? What is he sent to do? Peter describes prophets as "holy men of God [who] spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21). But is that the whole story?

"The Hebrew word for prophet, nabi, means 'one who announces or brings a message from God.' Our word 'prophet' has essentially the same meaning, one who speaks by divine inspiration as the interpreter or spokesman of God, whether it be a message of duty, a warning or a prediction of future events. The twofold meaning is due to the two senses of the preposition pro (in the Greek from which our word prophet is derived), 'for' and 'before'; so a prophet is one who speaks for God, and one who tells before hand what is to take place" (Peloubet's Bible Dictionary, 1971, "Prophet, Prophecy").

It is important that we understand the role of these prophets. Daniel refers to prophets as "Your [God's] servants…who spoke in Your name to our kings and our princes, to our fathers and all the people of the land" (Daniel 9:6). They were messengers whose role went far beyond revealing the future. They also gave instruction, pointed to lessons from history, reminded the people of their covenant with God, showed kings and nations their sins and proclaimed God's call to repentance. As God's spokesman, the Bible sometimes referred to a prophet simply as "a man of God" (1 Samuel 2:27).

God usually revealed His will to prophets through visions and dreams. They saw, in clear mental images, what God wanted them to convey to the people—such as, "The word that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem" (Isaiah 2:1). They then described, in their own words and style, what they saw or heard (verse 8). Sometimes God told them what to say. Many prophetic passages are introduced with the words, "Thus says the Lord…" (Isaiah 44:6; Jeremiah 8:4; Ezekiel 11:5).

Israel's spiritual decline

From shortly after the death of Joshua to the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., the spiritual condition of the people of Israel deteriorated. Only during part of the reigns of a few kings—David, Solomon, Hezekiah and Josiah—were ancient Israel and Judah considered relatively righteous and obedient nations.

Under Solomon's leadership, Israel reached the pinnacle of its expansion, prosperity and fame. However, Solomon's heavy taxation spawned misery and resentment. Meanwhile his pagan wives influenced him to turn away from God to idolatry.

Immediately after the death of Solomon, his son Rehoboam ignored the advice of his senior advisers to reverse Solomon's excessive taxation, a policy that threatened to divide the kingdom. The northern tribes especially resented such heavy taxation and, under the leadership of Jeroboam, 10 tribes revolted and reorganized into a separate kingdom.

Almost immediately this new kingdom, the house of Israel, adopted forms of idolatry for its religious ceremonies. Judah, the southern kingdom, retained the right form of worship and at times experienced spiritual reawakenings under righteous kings that included Hezekiah and Josiah. But even Judah generally failed to curtail the spread of idolatry within its borders.

The moral and spiritual climate in both kingdoms degenerated, with first a rapid decline in the house of Israel followed by a prolonged decline in the house of Judah. Rulers and subjects alike began disregarding their covenant with God. God specifically condemned their idolatry and ignoring of the Sabbath day, the time He had set apart for weekly rest and worship.

Soon the afflictions and punishments for disobedience that God had spelled out in detail in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 began to affect both kingdoms on a grand scale. Through His prophets, God pleaded for repentance for several centuries with both the house of Judah and the house of Israel. For the most part the people ignored and scorned the warnings of the prophets.

At first the prophets used only the spoken word to condemn the two nations' moral and spiritual corruption. They pleaded for repentance. The two prominent prophets during this long period of spiritual and moral decline were Elijah and Elisha. We read about their work near the end of the book of 1 Kings and in the early chapters of 2 Kings. Ultimately the prophets began to proclaim their prophetic warnings not only with spoken appeals but with written prophetic messages.

Written prophecy became necessary

As Israel and Judah further slid into moral and spiritual degeneracy, God would soon dramatically increase His punishment for their sins. He sent His prophets with a new and terrifying warning to announce to both nations: Unless you repent of your collective sins—particularly your covetousness, idolatry and Sabbath-breaking—captivity and exile will soon be your fate. Foreign conquerors will invade your borders, destroy your cities and carry your survivors to faraway lands.

In those days empires often intimidated nearby smaller kingdoms into submission simply by the threat of invasion. The weaker countries usually consented to become vassal states to the powerful rulers, who demanded total allegiance. As long as the vassal states paid the required tax or tribute—and maintained their allegiance to the more powerful empire—they generally were allowed to govern themselves. But any insubordination was quickly crushed, and additional restrictions to their freedom were imposed. If the vassals again tried to shake off the control of the superior power, they were routed by military force and the survivors carried away into exile.

Why was the threat of exile to Israel and Judah so important to God that He wanted it recorded in writing for future generations? Why did He decide that the whole world must know why and how He would disown His chosen people for a time? After all, God had promised this land to the descendants of Abraham forever. How could He take it away from them without destroying His own credibility?

God keeps His promises

God wants the world to know that He always keeps His promises. He specifically promised Abraham and David that their descendants, their seed, would inherit and rule over a particular land—the land of Canaan—forever. But through the prophets God then told Israel and Judah that He would drive them out of that land. This required an explanation.

How could God expel His people from the Promised Land into captivity and exile and still keep His promises? Would God abandon His promises and covenants? Would David's dynasty cease?

God determined to answer these questions in advance. He wanted no scoffer to have legitimate reason to accuse Him of ignoring or abandoning His promises and covenants. He chose to permanently record why He was sending the descendants of Israel—both kingdoms—into exile.

So He sent His prophets not only to warn but to record what He planned so all peoples could read—in advance—His plans to restore Israel as one kingdom. One of the first prophets to write about the impending exile of the northern kingdom of Israel exclaimed: "Surely the Lord God does nothing, unless He reveals His secret to His servants the prophets" (Amos 3:7). God commissioned such prophets not only to warn about impending disasters but to explain that He would later fulfill every promise He had ever made.

With this background, we read that God had the prophets record for all generations what the future would hold. This is history written in advance.

The same prophecies that foretold the fall of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah give specific details concerning the coming of the Messiah and the restoration of the throne of David. These prophecies explain that the Messiah—as the Son of David and the Son of God—will restore, at His second coming, the kingdom of Israel as part of His own worldwide Kingdom.

Through these prophecies, God provides mankind with proof of the reliability of His promises and covenants. Prophecy establishes God's credibility and faithfulness for all who take the time to study and accept His Word.

Just as God had earlier demonstrated—by Israel's miraculous Exodus from Egypt—that His promises of nationhood to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were reliable, so He will demonstrate the complete reliability of His Word by fulfilling everything He has announced through the mouths and pens of His prophets. Through them He revealed the good and bad aspects of the future of Israel and that these things will demonstrably affect the future of mankind.

Even more important, when everything is said and done, God will have demonstrated that He and He alone is the One who has ultimate power over our destiny. He will have proved beyond a shadow of doubt these words: "I am God, and there is none like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done … Indeed I have spoken it; I will also bring it to pass. I have purposed it; I will also do it" (Isaiah 46:9-11).

God will demonstrate that He is God

Through the prophet Ezekiel, God explains the great purpose for the events He has revealed to us:

"'I will set My glory among the nations; all the nations shall see My judgment which I have executed, and My hand which I have laid on them. So the house of Israel shall know that I am the Lord their God from that day forward. The Gentiles shall know that the house of Israel went into captivity for their iniquity; because they were unfaithful to Me, therefore I hid My face from them. I gave them into the hand of their enemies, and they all fell by the sword. According to their uncleanness and according to their transgressions I have dealt with them, and hidden My face from them.'

"Therefore thus says the Lord God: 'Now I will bring back the captives of Jacob, and have mercy on the whole house of Israel … When I have brought them back from the peoples and gathered them out of their enemies' lands, and I am hallowed in them in the sight of many nations, then they shall know that I am the Lord their God, who sent them into captivity among the nations, but also brought them back to their land, and left none of them captive any longer'" (Ezekiel 39:21-28; compare with Exodus 6:7).

God put these prophecies in writing so all humanity will be able to understand and believe in His great power and truthfulness. All peoples will then have incontrovertible evidence that they can trust Him as the living and faithful God. If God should fail to keep a single promise, His word would always be suspect. Prophecy explains how He will keep His promises—both to punish those who rebel against Him and to bless those who yield to His instructions.

God intends to use His prophecies—and their astounding accuracy—to demonstrate to all that He is indeed the God of truth. They will come to realize the reliability of Jesus Christ's plain statement concerning God: "Your word is truth" (John 17:17).

God will confirm His credibility

We must remember the promises made to Abraham and David and the covenant God established with Israel. God binds Himself to be faithful to His word. Therefore He has obliged Himself to restore all the inheritance and all the blessings He took away in the exile of Israel and Judah.

Again, through Ezekiel, God said: "Surely I will take the children of Israel from among the nations, wherever they have gone, and will gather them from every side and bring them into their own land; and I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel; and one king shall be king over them all; they shall no longer be two nations, nor shall they ever be divided into two kingdoms again.

"They shall not defile themselves anymore with their idols, nor with their detestable things, nor with any of their transgressions; but I will deliver them from all their dwelling places in which they have sinned, and will cleanse them. Then they shall be My people, and I will be their God" (Ezekiel 37:21-23).

So convincing will be the evidence of the reality of God that real repentance accompanied by a stunning transformation in the way the people of Israel respond to Him will come to pass. "'And a Redeemer will come to Zion [Jerusalem], and to those who turn from transgression in Jacob,' declares the Lord. 'And as for Me, this is My covenant with them,' says the Lord: 'My Spirit which is upon you, and My words which I have put in your mouth, shall not depart from your

mouth, nor from the mouth of your offspring, nor from the mouth of your offspring's offspring,' says the Lord, 'from now and forever'" (Isaiah 59:20-21, NASB).

The apostle Paul reaffirmed this concept centuries later: "For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion, that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: 'The Deliverer will come out of Zion, and He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob'" (Romans 11:25-26).

No room will be left for doubt of God's existence and reliability. Proof that He is real and that His Word is to be trusted will stand overwhelming and irrefutable.

Once the descendants of ancient Israel accept the undeniable evidence that God has inspired and faithfully fulfilled the prophecies written in His Word, Christ will begin to teach the other nations this same truth. God will then have brought all nations—all of humanity—to repentance. The books of prophecy in our Bibles will provide the indisputable evidence that God can accurately foretell the end from the beginning.

History Proves the Accuracy of Bible Prophecy

Can you believe Bible prophecy? The history of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah is a powerful testimony to the accuracy and precision of Bible prophecy. Consider, for example, God's prophecies of the fate of Israel if the Israelites rebelled against Him.

The story begins with Israel's split into two kingdoms, Israel and Judah, around 931 B.C., soon after Solomon's death. Jeroboam, king of Israel (ca. 931-910), instituted idolatry as part of his kingdom's worship (1 Kings 12:26-33).

God warned Jeroboam's wife of the consequences of his, and the kingdom's, idolatry: "For the Lord will strike Israel . . . He will uproot Israel from this good land which He gave to their fathers, and will scatter them beyond the River [the Euphrates], because they have made their wooden images, provoking the Lord to anger" (1 Kings 14:15).

God continued, through His prophets, to warn of the punishment sure to come if the Israelites would not turn from their sinful ways. He waited, patiently and mercifully, for a repentance that never came.

One such prophet was Micah (mid to late 700s B.C.), author of the biblical book that bears his name. "The word of the Lord that came to Micah...which he saw concerning Samaria [Israel's capital] and Jerusalem...I will make Samaria a heap of ruins in the field, places for planting a vineyard; I will pour down her stones into the valley, and I will uncover her foundations" (Micah 1:1-2, 6).

Finally, after successive invasions, the Assyrian Empire devastated Israel and took most of its population captive (722 B.C.).

"Now the king of Assyria went throughout all the land, and went up to Samaria and besieged it for three years. In the ninth year of Hoshea, the king of Assyria took Samaria and carried Israel away to Assyria...For so it was that the children of Israel had sinned against the Lord their God...And they rejected His statutes and His covenant that He had made with their fathers, and His testimonies which He had testified against them; they followed idols, became idolaters, and went after the nations who were all around them, concerning whom the Lord had charged them that they should not do like them" (2 Kings 17:5-7, 15).

As noted above, God had prophesied almost 200 years earlier that He would "uproot Israel from this good land which He gave to their fathers, and...scatter them beyond the [Euphrates] River..." This and many other details of the prophecies and historical account of the Assyrian invasions and resultant Israelite captivity are verified by Assyrian records and other archaeological discoveries.

Judah fails to learn a lesson

Even after witnessing the downfall of the kingdom of Israel, citizens of the kingdom of Judah themselves drifted into idolatry and disobedience. God sent prophets to warn them of their fate

if they failed to repent.

Through the prophet Jeremiah (late 600s through 500s B.C.), God delivered a remarkable prophecy of Judah's future:

"The Lord has sent to you all His servants the prophets, rising early and sending them, but you have not listened nor inclined your ear to hear. They said, 'Repent now everyone of his evil way and his evil doings, and dwell in the land that the Lord has given to you and your fathers forever and ever. Do not go after other gods to serve them and worship them, and do not provoke Me to anger with the works of your hands; and I will not harm you.'

"'Yet you have not listened to Me...Because you have not heard My words, behold, I will send and take all the families of the north,' says the Lord, 'and Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, My servant, and will bring them against this land, against its inhabitants, and against these nations all around, and will utterly destroy them...And this whole land shall be a desolation and an astonishment, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years.

"'Then it will come to pass, when seventy years are completed, that I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity,' says the Lord; 'and I will make it a perpetual desolation'" (Jeremiah 25:4-12).

Judah would fall to the Babylonians, God warned, and would go into captivity in Babylon for 70 years. At the end of the 70 years God would, in turn, punish Babylon. In another astonishing prophecy, God revealed through Isaiah the name of the ruler—Cyrus, king of Persia—who would, a century and a half after Isaiah wrote, permit the Jews' return (Isaiah 44:28; 45:1-4).

Jeremiah's prophecy came to pass. After several invasions, Judah fell to the Babylonians.

God fulfills His promise

The 70 years in exile passed. Daniel 5 records that the Babylonian monarch Belshazzar held a great and blasphemous feast at which he and his guests drank wine from gold and silver vessels looted from the Jerusalem temple years before by Nebuchadnezzar. The king watched as a ghostly hand appeared and wrote a mysterious message on the wall. The king "was so frightened that his knees knocked together and his legs gave way" (verse 6, NIV).

The prophet Daniel revealed that this original handwriting on the wall signified God's judgment that Babylon's dominance had come to an end. He told the king, "'Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians'...[and] that very night Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, was slain" (verses 28, 30, NIV).

A century later the Greek historian Herodotus (484-420) confirmed Daniel's account of the fall of Babylon: "The Persians, drawing off the river [Euphrates] by a canal into the lake, which was till now a marsh, he [Cyrus] made the stream to sink till its former channel could be forded. When this happened, the Persians who were posted with this intent made their way into Babylon by the channel of the Euphrates, which had now sunk to about the height of the middle of a man's thigh...The Persians thus entered the city...and the inhabitants who lived in the central part of Babylon were unaware of the enemies' presence due to the great size of the city and since they were celebrating a festival. They continued dancing and exchanging gifts until they were

suddenly told of their sad fate. In this manner was Babylon conquered" (History, book 1, paragraphs 191-192).

Daniel's prediction, along with the prophecies of other prophets of God about the downfall of Babylon, was suddenly and dramatically fulfilled.

Jeremiah's prophecy of a 70-year captivity and Isaiah's prophecy of Cyrus allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar were also fulfilled down to the last detail. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah record the Jews' return from exile.

Fulfilled prophecy's meaning for us

A series of remarkable prophecies spanning hundreds of years, five kingdoms and many prophets and rulers precisely came to pass. As God had said through Isaiah when He foretold Judah's downfall at the hands of the Babylonians: "I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure'... Indeed I have spoken it; I will also bring it to pass. I have purposed it; I will also do it" (Isaiah 46:9-11).

God alone has the power to prophesy events and then bring them to pass. He will yet bring to pass the many other unfulfilled prophecies recorded in His Word.

The International Scope of Prophecy

Though much of prophecy is focused on specific peoples, God's plan extends to all nations. He reveals how He will ultimately deal with all of humankind.

Skeptics who accuse God of favoring the descendants of Israel to the detriment of other nations are often unaware of the scope of God's master plan. Though the people of Israel play a pivotal role in the fulfillment of the plan, their role is not just for their own benefit.

God promised Abraham, "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). To fulfill that objective, God also promised Abraham: "I will make you [through the people of Israel] a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you" (Genesis 12:2-3).

When we carefully examine Bible prophecy, we find that God is simply remaining faithful to His promise. Individuals and nations who oppose the way God has chosen to use the people of Israel—because of His promises to Abraham—are doomed to ultimate failure. This is not because Abraham's Israelite descendants are better than other nations. It is because such people set themselves against God's will.

God's plan extends to all nations

God is fair. He severely punished ancient Israel and Judah when they rebelled against Him. He blesses anyone who complies with His instructions and punishes those who do not. He ultimately shows no partiality in His treatment of Israelites over non-Israelites (Deuteronomy 10:17-19).

In the text of the Ten Commandments, He explained that His laws apply to all: "I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments" (Exodus 20:5-6).

God judges people by their responses to His instructions. He specifically told the people of ancient Israel to love the stranger (foreigner) because they themselves had once been foreigners in Egypt (Leviticus 19:34). God explained to Abraham that His master plan calls for blessing "all the families of the earth" (Genesis 12:3).

That plan involves using Abraham's descendants through Jacob in a prominent and special role. Jesus Christ, of course, is the principal offspring of Abraham in the plan (Matthew 1:1; Galatians 3:29); salvation is accessible only through Him (Acts 4:10-12).

But the other physical descendants of Israel play a vital role in God's plan. It is important that we comprehend the international implications of biblical prophecy so Israel's role is not misinterpreted. God is focused not only on Israel. His purpose concerns all nations, all peoples.

Isaiah begins his prophecy with these words, "Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth!" (Isaiah

1:2). He soon adds, "Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow to it" (Isaiah 2:2). In the last chapter of the same book, God tells us through Isaiah, "It shall be that I will gather all nations...and they shall come and see My glory" (Isaiah 66:18).

Prophecy transcends national borders. Though God focuses more attention on His plan for the descendants of Abraham, He does not forget the rest of mankind (Acts 10:34-35). He will bless all who obey Him and will punish all who stubbornly set their will against Him—Israelites and other nations alike.

God's long-range purpose is to change the behavior of all people. This is because He is "not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). He promised, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations" (Isaiah 56:7).

Prophecy explains how this will happen.

God loved the world

Even though God chose Israel as "a special treasure...above all people" (Exodus 19:5), His purpose goes far beyond the Israelites. Moses explained this when God was establishing Israel as a nation: "See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the LORD my God commanded me ... Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people'" (Deuteronomy 4:5-6, NIV).

Over the protests of the prophet Jonah, God sent him to prophesy to the gentile city of Nineveh. Its citizens responded to his warning and repented, and God spared them. He has concern for all peoples.

To Israel God gave the crucial responsibility of living God's ways as a model for the benefit of other nations. At that time the Israelites did not have a heart to obey God (Jeremiah 7:23-24). So their success as a role model was short-lived. Over time their conduct degenerated to the same level as that of the other nations around them.

Finally God temporarily withdrew His blessings from the descendants of Abraham, and they were taken into captivity. God then offered Nebuchadnezzar, the gentile king of Babylon, an unusual opportunity to serve Him. Daniel, the prophet who was a key administrator in Nebuchadnezzar's government, recorded that God offered this gentile monarch the chance to repent of his sins and apply the laws of God to his kingdom.

The nations and peoples in Nebuchadnezzar's vast empire would have benefited immeasurably had he accepted God's offer. Then this knowledge and understanding of the ways of God could have passed on to future generations.

God allowed Nebuchadnezzar to rule an empire whose culture and influence would far outlast him, extending into the empires and cultures that would succeed Babylon. But, because Nebuchadnezzar wouldn't submit to God, Babylon 's influence would be far more evil than good. Scripture shows this evil influence will continue through time even to the second coming of

Jesus Christ (Revelation 17:5; 18:2).

The future revealed to a gentile king

To get Nebuchadnezzar's attention, God revealed to him, through a dream, a glimpse of the future. Daniel explained to the king that "there is a God in heaven who reveals secrets, and He has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the latter days" (Daniel 2:28).

Daniel continued: "The God of heaven has given you a kingdom...But after you shall arise another kingdom inferior to yours; then another, a third kingdom of bronze, which shall rule over all the earth. And the fourth kingdom shall be as strong as iron...And in the days of these kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed;...and it shall stand forever" (verses 37-44).

Because of Israel's sins, God granted gentile rulers dominance in that region until a final kingdom—the Kingdom of God—would reign at Christ's return. God revealed this most basic prophecy—an outline of future dominant powers in that region—to Nebuchadnezzar.

At about the same time, God sent Daniel to tell the monarch, "O king, let my advice be acceptable to you; break off your sins by being righteous" (Daniel 4:27). Although he temporarily acknowledged God's greatness, Nebuchadnezzar never really heeded Daniel's admonition.

God humbled the king by giving him over to insanity for seven years. During that time he was incapable of administering the affairs of Babylon. Daniel had warned him: "They shall drive you from men, your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field, and they shall make you eat grass like oxen ... till you know that the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, and gives it to whomever He chooses" (Daniel 4:25). God made sure Nebuchadnezzar was left with no excuse for disobeying Him.

When it was all over, Nebuchadnezzar issued a proclamation: "To all peoples, nations, and languages that dwell in all the earth: Peace be multiplied to you. I thought it good to declare the signs and wonders that the Most High God has worked for me. How great are His signs, and how mighty His wonders! His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and His dominion is from generation to generation" (verses 1-3).

The Babylonian king acknowledged God's power and authority over the earth. But we have no indication that he permanently changed his idolatrous ways and began serving only the true God. He came to understand, however, that Daniel's God was greater than all the other gods he worshipped.

A lesson of history

What God has shown, and history has repeatedly demonstrated, is that neither national leaders nor their people are able consistently to obey God on their own. Paul summed it up when he wrote: "What then? Are we [Jews] better than they [gentiles]? Not at all. For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks [gentiles] that they are all under sin. As it is written: 'There is

none righteous, no, not one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside; they have together become unprofitable; there is none who does good, no, not one'" (Romans 3:9-12).

Not until Jesus Christ establishes the Kingdom of God on earth, and God gives His Spirit to "all flesh" (Joel 2:28; Acts 2:17, 38), to those who willingly repent, can righteousness become widespread. God revealed this same truth to Nebuchadnezzar through Daniel: "The God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever" (Daniel 2:44).

This truth is the focus of Bible prophecy. Prophecy shows how the Creator God will intervene in mankind's affairs and establish His Kingdom, which will bring peace, righteousness and salvation to all humanity.

Bible prophecy is international in scope. It is centered on the only Ruler—Jesus Christ, the Son of God—who can establish utopia on earth.

Now let's see how that promised utopia will come about.

The End of 'This Present Evil Age'

Many Bible prophecies deal with the time that appears to lie immediately before us—the end of the age of the rule of Satan the devil over the world.

"Now as [Jesus] sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, 'Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?'" (Matthew 24:3). They wanted to know when the age of human misrule under Satan—which the apostle Paul refers to as "this present evil age" (Galatians 1:4)—would give way to the Kingdom of God.

Jesus explained that His return would be preceded by "great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be" (Matthew 24:21).

It's difficult to imagine the magnitude of suffering that will take place during a few terrifying years at the end of our age. Prophecy portrays that time as the most violent and tumultuous period in history. Jesus continued, "If that time of troubles were not cut short, no living thing could survive" (verse 22, REB).

Mercifully, that frightening time will quickly pass. Immediately after it will begin the wonderful era of the Kingdom of God, about which Daniel wrote. Christ will return at the conclusion of that violent era to establish permanent peace.

Why, then, will God allow those days of war and chaos to occur?

The unseen hand of the arch-deceiver

As we've seen, the Bible warns us of Satan the devil's deception of mankind. Through this deception he has made himself the ruler and god of this present age. Just before Jesus returns, God Almighty will permit Satan to finally bring about what he started with the original city of ancient Babel, or Babylon (Genesis 11:1, 4). Satan used a man named Nimrod to organize the many small but rapidly multiplying tribes of mankind into a system quite different from what God intended.

Nimrod's kingdom was the first recorded attempt to unite all people into a single empire (Genesis 10:8-12). His ambitious effort, however, was contrary to God's purpose. It was humanity's first attempt to thwart God's desire to give each family group its own territory as an inheritance (Genesis 10:32). God wanted man-kind to make use of the extended family as the foundation for organization and structure. Nimrod, however, persuaded the people of his time to reject God's plan in favor of a single empire supported by a strong military force.

Nimrod's followers lacked faith in God's protection, leadership and way of life. They wanted to decide for themselves how the earth should be organized and governed. They preferred to remain as one people and organize themselves without family distinctions (Genesis 11:1, 4).

What was God's reaction? He intervened in the incident at the Tower of Babel and, by confusing

their language, compelled earth's early inhabitants to scatter and form separate nations as He had intended (verses 6-8). Ever since, God's prophets have used the term Babylon as a symbolic representation of Satan's dominion through human government, culture and religion.

During the latter days of the kingdom of Judah, in the sixth century B.C., the ancient city of Babylon expanded its power to become the dominant regional empire under the leadership of King Nebuchadnezzar II (the Nebuchadnezzar of the Bible).

At the time of the end, Satan, for a brief time, will again organize several blocs of nations into significant world powers (Revelation 9:16-18; 17:12-13).

The symbolic beast will rise again

Chapter 12 of Revelation pictures Satan as "a great, fiery red dragon having seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads" (verse 3). It describes his attempt to destroy Jesus Christ shortly after His birth: "And the dragon stood before the woman who was ready to give birth, to devour her Child as soon as it was born" (verse 4; compare Matthew 2:13-21).

At length the scene shifts to the time of the end: "Therefore rejoice, O heavens, and you who dwell in them! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and the sea! For the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, because he knows that he has a short time" (verse 12).

Next Revelation 13 begins with a description of "a beast rising up out of the sea, having seven heads and ten horns, and on his horns ten crowns, and on his heads a blasphemous name" (verse 1). This beast reflects characteristics of four similar beasts mentioned in one of Daniel's prophetic visions (Daniel 7).

The apostle John, who wrote the book of Revelation, further describes the beast as he saw it: "Now the beast which I saw was like a leopard, his feet were like the feet of a bear, and his mouth like the mouth of a lion. The dragon gave him his power, his throne, and great authority" (Revelation 13:2).

Satan (the dragon) is the power behind the scenes. This end-time political and military alliance will reflect many of the features of the four ancient empires that began with King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon.

"The beast that you saw [having the same basic characteristics as the four beasts in Daniel 7, which represent ancient Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome] was, and is not, and will ascend out of the bottomless pit and go to perdition. And those who dwell on the earth will marvel, whose names are not written in the Book of Life from the foundation of the world, when they see the beast that was, and is not, and yet is" (Revelation 17:8).

With the fall of Rome, that ancient system supposedly came to an end—as if mortally wounded. But its surprising revival, from the ashes of the Roman Empire, is described here in the book of Revelation: "And I saw one of his heads as if it had been mortally wounded, and his deadly wound was healed. And all the world marveled and followed the beast" (Revelation 13:3).

Notice the power and influence this satanically guided governing system will wield in the last days: "So they worshiped the dragon who gave authority to the beast; and they worshiped the

beast, saying, 'Who is like the beast? Who is able to make war with him?'" (verse 4). The world will fear and marvel at the enormous power of this alliance of nations.

Notice the configuration of this political and military alliance. "The ten horns which you saw are ten kings who have received no kingdom as yet, but they receive authority for one hour [a short time] as kings with the beast. These are of one mind, and they will give their power and authority to the beast. These will make war with the Lamb, and the Lamb will overcome them" (Revelation 17:12-14).

Another beast

"Then I saw another beast coming up out of the earth, and he had two horns like a lamb [as if inspired by or trying to impersonate Christ] and spoke like a dragon [Satan]. And he exercises all the authority of the first beast in his presence, and causes the earth and those who dwell in it to worship the first beast, whose deadly wound was healed" (Revelation 13:11-12). This beast claims to represent Jesus Christ—the true Lamb of God (verse 8)—but actually speaks for Satan concerning what people are to worship.

In Revelation 17 this beast is also pictured as a fallen woman, a harlot: "And I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast which was full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns. The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls, having in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the filthiness of her fornication. And on her forehead a name was written: MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH" (verses 3-5).

The fallen woman sits on and guides the first beast (the alliance of 10 kings, rulers of nations or groups of nations). She is the world's chief advocate of Satan's disgraceful doctrines. She artfully preserves the pagan mysteries—the fundamentals of ancient Babylon's religion—in her traditions and teachings. She will be a fierce advocate of these ancient religious customs and practices at the end of this age, again making them internationally popular.

Who is this spiritual harlot? "And the woman whom you saw is that great city which reigns over the kings of the earth" (verse 18). The ancient cities of Babylon and Rome controlled vast empires, subjecting many nations and kings to their traditions and culture. Prophecy reveals that a modern city will assume a similar role at the time of the end.

This city will be powerfully influential in this world's religious, political and economic arenas. By the time the fallen woman—this Babylon the Great—is destroyed by Christ, it will be the case that "all the nations have drunk of the wine of the wrath of her fornication, the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the merchants of the earth have become rich through the abundance of her luxury" (Revelation 18:3).

This is a religious power that will influence every level of society. For a time she will be the pacesetter for the world. She is "the great harlot who sits on many waters, with whom the kings of the earth committed fornication, and the inhabitants of the earth were made drunk with the wine of her fornication" (Revelation 17:1-2).

Satan will employ the traditions and beliefs of this powerful city to deceive the world (Revelation 12:9). "The waters which you saw, where the harlot sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations, and

tongues [languages]" (Revelation 17:15).

Satan will also use the leaders of these two beasts to convince the world that a new political and religious alliance is the key to lasting international peace. But the entire system will be built on concepts that appeal to human reasoning, lust and vanity while rejecting the revealed laws and ways of God. Partly for that reason, the book of Revelation aptly defines this end-time advocate of Satan's traditions as "Babylon the Great" (Revelation 16:19; 18:2).

Psalm 2:1-3 describes the attitude of rulers and other people who embrace Satan's principles: "Why do the nations rage, and the people plot a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against His Anointed, saying, 'Let us break Their bonds in pieces and cast away Their cords from us.'" Satan's political and religious systems are rooted in the popular conviction that man has the right to decide for himself what is right and wrong.

Illusion of peace

The devil boasted to Jesus Christ of his power and control over "all the kingdoms of the world" (Matthew 4:8-9). He will never willingly relinquish his powerful influence over mankind. This is why the world will experience the terrifying time prophesied by Jesus Christ—a time that, if not cut short, would lead to the extinction of human life (Matthew 24:21-22).

Satan, the master deceiver, often deludes human agents into marketing his deceptive arguments. He uses them to champion his basic concepts. At the time of the end, Satan's philosophy will be vigorously promoted as mankind's final hope for world peace and security (1 Thessalonians 5:2-3). It will be championed as the world's greatest opportunity to work together for the good of all.

Scripture refers to Satan's main advocate in the time of the end as "the man of sin..., the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God" (2 Thessalonians 2:3-4).

His efforts will be "according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie" (verses 9-11). This man's persuasive powers will be enormous.

Tragically, multitudes from all nations will believe his clever lies. They will enthusiastically endorse the concepts Satan introduced at the Tower of Babel. They will be thoroughly deluded into believing deceptive assurances that these satanic concepts will produce world peace and harmony.

A time of worldwide conflict

But these false promises of lasting peace and security will be short-lived. Satan's end-time

political kingdom will have a fatal flaw that will rip its unity apart.

God revealed to the prophet Daniel that, in its final phase, "the kingdom shall be partly strong and partly fragile. As you saw iron mixed with ceramic clay, they will mingle with the seed of men; but they will not adhere to one another, just as iron does not mix with clay" (Daniel 2:42-43).

The nations involved will be unable to override their differences. At the very end "the ten horns which you saw on the beast...will hate the harlot, make her desolate and naked, eat her flesh and burn her with fire" (Revelation 17:16).

Adding to the turmoil and conflict will be kings from east of the Euphrates River who take part in "the battle of that great day of God Almighty" (Revelation 16:12-14).

Also, many prophecies imply the end-time existence of people descended from the 12 tribes of Israel. Some of these prophecies indicate that these descendants of both the house of Israel and the house of Judah—the Jews—will become objects of Satan's wrath (Daniel 12:1; Jeremiah 31:7-10; Revelation 7:2-4; 12:1, 13).

Remember that the apostle John, in his vision concerning Satan's part in end-time events, heard a voice exclaiming: "Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and the sea! For the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, because he knows that he has a short time" (Revelation 12:12).

Satan's intentions embody no concern for the welfare of human beings. He wants to use the factions of humanity for war, not peace. The devil knows Jesus Christ will soon return. He is fully aware that his control over humanity will soon end. Therefore, Bible prophecy reveals, Satan plans to manipulate humanity's efforts to achieve lasting peace and unity as a tool for venting his own anger against Christ.

Rather than enjoying peace and safety, mankind will fall victim to Satan's desperation and wrath. The devil will once again pit mankind against the true God. The armies of many nations will gather in the vicinity of Jerusalem for the most terrifying military showdown in history. Jerusalem is considered a holy city by three of this world's great religions. Geographically, it is in one of the most strategically important locations on earth—the crossroads of the continents of Africa, Asia and Europe.

The battle of the great day of God Almighty

To assemble these armies, Satan will send "spirits of demons, performing signs...to the kings of the earth and of the whole world, to gather them to the battle of that great day of God Almighty" (Revelation 16:14). What the gathered generals, other officers and soldiers will not realize is that Satan plans to use them to fight Jesus Christ as He descends from heaven (Revelation 19:11-19; Zechariah 14:3-4).

This "great day of God Almighty" (Revelation 16:14) is also called the "Day of the Lord" in the Scriptures. These terms, in this context, refer to the time just before Christ returns when God will punish a defiant humanity for its rebellion. It is the time when the nations in Satan's system will bring on themselves the just wrath of God (Revelation 14:9-10).

A large faction in this final battle—the beast power supported by a coalition of 10 rulers—will amass its armies on the plain near the ancient military stronghold of Megiddo in northern Israel: "And they gathered them together to the place called in Hebrew, Armageddon" (Revelation 16:16).

The very word Armageddon (the Greek form of the Hebrew Har Megiddo or hill of Megiddo) has become a term for a vast and decisive battle that threatens all life on the planet. That was the point of Christ's statement about the time of the end: Human survival is at stake! Weapons of mass destruction are so powerful that life on earth can be destroyed many times over.

As Daniel was told, "At that time...there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation, even to that time" (Daniel 12:1). Without Jesus Christ's intervention to rescue the world from Satan's cunning and man's foolishness, human life would be extinguished.

Maybe this seems too outlandish to take seriously. But it is real. It will happen. The apostle Paul spoke plainly of this earth-shaking time: "For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night [at an unexpected time]. For when they say, 'Peace and safety!' then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape" (1 Thessalonians 5:2-3).

When the world's final effort for international unity to ensure "peace and safety" falls apart, a world war unlike anything man has ever seen will result. After a brief period of unimaginable destruction, Christ will intervene to prevent human annihilation (Matthew 24:22).

God will humble the nations

Why must the world come to this tragic state of affairs? What is God's purpose in the cataclysmic events of what the Bible calls "the great and awesome day of the LORD"? (Joel 2:31).

God's ultimate goal has always been to bring all people to repentance (2 Peter 3:9). But a repentant humanity is impossible as long as most people follow Satan's lead in proudly exalting human opinions and traditions above the teaching of the living God.

Long ago, through Isaiah, God explained what He plans to accomplish during the coming Day of the Lord: "For the day of the LORD of hosts shall come upon everything proud and lofty, upon everything lifted up; and it shall be brought low" (Isaiah 2:12). Before Jesus Christ returns to assume rulership over the earth, God plans to humble all people who will respond to His correction.

The survivors from this brief but devastating period—especially those descended from ancient Israel and Judah—will be primarily people whose hearts have softened and been humbled by their experiences (Isaiah 2:11). Through their trauma God will prepare a humbled people who will willingly accept Christ's leadership and teaching when He returns.

Through the prophet Zephaniah, God explained that He uses catastrophes to humble people: "My determination is to gather the nations to My assembly of kingdoms, to pour on them My indignation, all My fierce anger; all the earth shall be devoured with the fire of My jealousy...for then I will take away from your midst those who rejoice in your pride, and you shall no longer be

haughty in My holy mountain. I will leave in your midst a meek and humble people" (Zephaniah 3:8-12).

Though this passage is specifically directed toward the end-time remnant of Israel and Judah, it graphically illustrates how and why God humbles the proud and arrogant.

Through the prophet Ezekiel, God explained why He urges mankind to repent and turn from sin: "Again, when I say to the wicked, 'You shall surely die,' if he turns from his sin and does what is lawful and right, ... and walks in the statutes of life without committing iniquity, he shall surely live; he shall not die" (Ezekiel 33:14-15). Isaiah 59:20 illustrates the same principle: "'The Redeemer will come to Zion, and to those who turn from transgression in Jacob,' says the LORD."

On the other hand, God promises no such rescue for those who reject His correction and refuse to repent of their arrogant and rebellious ways. They will receive no divine protection from the horrendous destruction that will ravage the earth: "Behold, the day of the LORD comes, cruel, with both wrath and fierce anger, to lay the land desolate; and He will destroy its sinners from it" (Isaiah 13:9).

Preparing the world for Christ's return

Many prophetic passages describe the time of God's preparation of the world to accept the rule of Jesus Christ and the establishment of the Kingdom of God. As Creator of the universe, God will demonstrate His authority and power over everything He has created. Mankind will have no excuse for refusing to honor Him with the respect due His name.

Why are such drastic measures necessary?

Notice Paul's description of humanity's prevailing attitude at the time of the end: "But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power" (2 Timothy 3:1-5).

Mankind's attitude and motivation must change. The haughty, headstrong, unloving and brutal attitudes dominating the world at the time of the end must be altered. God knows that only the destruction of this world's society—ironically, mostly by man's own treachery and violence—will adequately shock hardened human minds into realizing that "this present evil age" is too corrupt to be preserved.

Our society is rapidly deteriorating morally and spiritually into the ungodly attitudes and practices that Paul warned would characterize the last days. Jesus gives this warning to people perceptive enough and willing to listen: "But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day come on you unexpectedly. For it will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth" (Luke 21:34-35).

Not willing to repent

Even in the terrifying midst of the dying and destruction of the end time, most people will cling to their evil ways: "But the rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands, that they should not worship demons...And they did not repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts" (Revelation 9:20-21).

The task of bringing mankind to repentance is neither simple nor quick, and it cannot happen without suffering. People have demonstrated throughout history that most will not face up to their sins unless they personally and immediately experience sin's devastating consequences.

The world we know will reap the full penalty of its sins. God compares end-time events to an angel harvesting a vine loaded with grapes: "So the angel thrust his sickle into the earth and gathered the vine of the earth, and threw it into the great winepress of the wrath of God" (Revelation 14:19). God will no longer limit the destructiveness of man or Satan—except to intervene just before human annihilation would occur.

The prophet Zephaniah described that day of reckoning for mankind's collective evil and rebellion: "The great day of the LORD is...a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of devastation and desolation...'I will bring distress upon men, and they shall walk like blind men, because they have sinned against the LORD; their blood shall be poured out like dust, and their flesh like refuse.' Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them in the day of the LORD's wrath" (Zephaniah 1:14-18).

Jesus describes this time as one of "great distress in the land and wrath upon this people...They will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led away captive into all nations" (Luke 21:23-24). He also explains that "Jerusalem will be trampled by Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled" (verse 24). God will allow gentiles to "tread the holy city underfoot for forty-two months"—a period of 3 1/2 years—just before Jesus returns (Revelation 11:2).

How the past relates to the future

Jesus ties the future to the roots of the crisis at the close of the age. To understand the importance of Jerusalem at the time of the end, we need to go back in history to the first fall of Jerusalem to gentile control. Jerusalem's fall back then directly relates to events at the end of the age.

In 586 B.C. the Babylonian Empire captured and destroyed Jerusalem. This momentous event, along with the capture and exile of Jerusalem's residents, was the final punishment God meted out on the ancient nations of Israel and Judah. It brought to an end the direct rule of King David's dynasty over the Holy Land and the city of Jerusalem. Jesus Christ will permanently reestablish and rule from David's throne there at His return (Luke 1:32-33).

Psalm 106:40-42 summarizes the captivity of Israel and Judah: "Therefore the wrath of the LORD was kindled against His people, so that He abhorred His own inheritance. And He gave them into the hand of the Gentiles, and those who hated them ruled over them. Their enemies also oppressed them, and they were brought into subjection under their hand."

From that time forward the hope of Israel's and Judah's descendants has been expressed in this prayer: "Save us, O LORD our God, and gather us from among the Gentiles, to give thanks to Your holy name, to triumph in Your praise" (verse 47). Through His prophets God promised ancient Israel and Judah He would bring them back to their land at the coming of the Messiah.

But the prophets also reveal that, immediately before the rule of the Messiah, Jerusalem will once again be under the rule and influence of gentiles. Even today, with a Jewish state reestablished in the Holy Land, many other nations, along with the native Arab population, contest Jewish authority over the original city of Jerusalem (East Jerusalem). The Temple Mount remains under Islamic control. Jerusalem is still a troubled and divided city, a constant source of international friction.

Jerusalem at the time of the end

Jerusalem is the focal point of many significant end-time events foretold in the Bible. "But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies," warned Jesus, "then know that its desolation is near...For these are the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled" (Luke 21:20-22).

Many prophecies seem to indicate these events will be triggered by the Jews designating a "holy place" in which they will again offer morning and evening animal sacrifices. This could so inflame other nations that the leader of the coalition of 10 rulers forming the beast power might intervene, setting up an "abomination" in this designated holy place (Daniel 11:31; 12:9-11)—a defilement that included an idolatrous image in the earlier, prototypical fulfillment of this prophecy (see "The Coming 'Abomination of Desolation'"). This scenario seems to be the most likely way these prophecies could be fulfilled in light of current conditions.

Notice the terrible significance Jesus places on this event: "So when you see standing in the holy place 'the abomination that causes desolation,' spoken of through the prophet Daniel—let the reader understand—then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let no one on the roof of his house go down to take anything out of the house. Let no one in the field go back to get his cloak. How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath. For then there will be great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again" (Matthew 24:15-21, NIV).

Witnesses for God and Satan

Jerusalem will be the focus of other crucial events during this fateful time. God will send to Jerusalem two prophets—as His two witnesses—to prophesy and perform miracles on His behalf. Like the prophet Elijah in ancient Israel, they will testify to the whole world that it is deceived, that it has rejected the true God in favor of an idolatrous lifestyle reflecting Satan's evil influence.

"'And I will give power to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy one thousand two hundred and sixty days [3 1/2 years]...And if anyone wants to harm them, fire proceeds from their mouth and devours their enemies. And if anyone wants to harm them, he must be killed in this manner.

These have power to shut heaven [as did the prophet Elijah of old], so that no rain falls in the days of their prophecy; and they have power over waters to turn them to blood [like Moses in Egypt], and to strike the earth with all plagues, as often as they desire" (Revelation 11:3-6).

But Satan has anticipated this and is prepared to resist God. He will ready his own counterfeits of God's two witnesses. These two tools of Satan are prophetically designated as "the beast" and a "false prophet who worked signs in his [the beast's] presence, by which he deceived those who received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped his image" (Revelation 19:20).

Set against each other for 42 months, or 3 1/2 years, will be these opposing pairs of spiritual leaders—one pair representing God, the other pair representing Satan and his system.

The beast of Revelation

It's important at this point to understand that in the book of Revelation the term beast can designate either Satan's governmental or religious system or the charismatic leader who is the human head of the governmental system. As in prophecies of Daniel, both the structure and its leader are represented as a beast that devours opponents.

Notice the influence the leader of the coalition of 10 rulers forming the beast power will wield over the world at that time: "And all the world marveled and followed the beast. So they worshiped the dragon who gave authority to the beast; and they worshiped the beast, saying, 'Who is like the beast? Who is able to make war with him?' And he was given a mouth speaking great things and blasphemies, and he was given authority to continue for forty-two months. Then he opened his mouth in blasphemy against God, to blaspheme His name, His tabernacle, and those who dwell in heaven. It was granted to him to make war with the saints and to overcome them" (Revelation 13:3-7).

The offense of these saints in the eyes of Satan is their allegiance to God in the face of the devil's domination of the world. Satan will "make war with...[those] who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ" (Revelation 12:17), persecuting and killing those faithful Christians (Matthew 24:9).

Putting it in context

The events at the time of the end are the climax of trends that began in the Garden of Eden. There Satan persuaded Adam and Eve to defy God's commands. At the time of the end, God will draw a clear distinction between people who live by His commandments and those who devise their own religious practices and rules of life under Satan's influence. When all is said and done, the winners will be "those who do His commandments" and therefore "have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city [New Jerusalem]" (Revelation 22:14).

Let's next put Satan's determination to destroy God's people in a larger context. In a vision the apostle John watched God the Father give Jesus Christ, in the presence of many witnesses, the greater part of the book of Revelation. It was in the form of a scroll. This scroll contained

descriptions of significant events related to Christ's second coming. But it was sealed with seven seals. Only Jesus Himself was found worthy to break the seals and open it to our understanding (Revelation 4-5).

John had made it clear in Revelation 1:10 that the "Lord's Day," or Day of the Lord, is the primary subject of these visions from Christ. They strip off the veil from the Old Testament prophecies that speak of God's judgment on the nations.

Opening the seals

In Revelation 6 Christ breaks the seven seals and unveils their meaning. The first four represent the religious deception, wars, famines and epidemics that lead up to the time of the end (Revelation 6:1-8). Satan's end-time persecution and martyrdom of God's people, as described in the fifth seal (verses 9-11), and the heavenly signs of the sixth seal (verses 12-16) also begin before "the great day of His wrath" (verse 17)—before the Day of the Lord.

The first six seals correspond to the signs Christ described in His Olivet prophecy, recorded in Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21. Jesus calls them "the beginning of birth pains" (Matthew 24:8, NIV). These precede the time of God's wrath, the Day of the Lord. Once these conditions and events begin, they continue to the very end of the age—increasing in frequency and severity like labor contractions. The intensity of destruction rapidly escalates from their cumulative effects as the end approaches.

The first six seals in Revelation 6 summarize major events and conditions that lead up to the Day of the Lord. The remainder of the book of Revelation concentrates primarily on what happens during the Day of the Lord. At that time God's judgment will fall on the nations, which are deceived by Babylon the Great. This will occur just before Christ establishes the Kingdom of God.

Persecution, tribulation and heavenly signs

It's important that we understand the relationship between the fifth, sixth and seventh seals. The fifth seal describes Satan's war on God's people, the end-time persecution and martyrdom of many of those who remain faithful to God: "When He opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held. And they cried with a loud voice, saying, 'How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?' Then ... it was said to them that they should rest a little while longer, until both the number of their fellow servants and their brethren, who would be killed as they were, was completed" (Revelation 6:9-11).

Jesus further described the persecution and martyrdom of His faithful servants at this bloody and dangerous time: "Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My name's sake. And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another. Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold. But he who endures to the end shall be saved" (Matthew 24:9-13).

Christ describes this frightening time as one of "great tribulation," an era unparalleled in history. "For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be. And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect's sake those days will be shortened" (verses 21-22).

Jesus explains what must happen next. "Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken" (verse 29).

Now notice how this corresponds to the sixth seal in Revelation 6:12-16: "I looked when He opened the sixth seal, and behold, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became like blood. And the stars of heaven fell to the earth, as a fig tree drops its late figs when it is shaken by a mighty wind. Then the sky receded as a scroll when it is rolled up, and every mountain and island was moved out of its place" (Revelation 6:12-14).

"And the kings of the earth, the great men, the rich men, the commanders, the mighty men, every slave and every free man, hid themselves in the caves and in the rocks of the mountains, and said to the mountains and rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb!'" (verses 15-16).

The sixth seal announces and introduces the Day of the Lord: "For the great day of His wrath has come, and who is able to stand?" (verse 17). The prophet Joel confirms that the time of great tribulation and the heavenly signs precede the Day of the Lord. "The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the coming of the great and awesome day of the LORD" (Joel 2:31).

The Day of the Lord arrives

The Day of the Lord is the time of God's wrath—His judgment on any who have set themselves against Him and His people. It is the time of his judgment and punishment of the world for its arrogance and disobedience to His commandments.

Notice what happens when Christ opens the next seal: "When He opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and to them were given seven trumpets" (Revelation 8:1-2).

This is the time written about since the beginning of written prophecy (Luke 21:22). Even the angels in heaven are silent while Jesus Christ breaks the awesome seventh seal. What it reveals is recorded in symbols portraying the major events of the Day of the Lord.

The judgments and punishments of the Day of the Lord are announced by seven angels blowing seven trumpets. The seven trumpets represent the totality of God's intervention in the affairs of man at the time of the end. Let's briefly look at the nature of the punishments that make up that intervention.

The seven trumpet plagues

The punishments announced by the first four trumpets devastate the earth's ecology—mankind's environmental support system. A third of the trees are destroyed in the first trumpet disaster, a third of ocean life is destroyed in the second, a third of the world's freshwater supply becomes unusable in the third disaster, and it appears that the atmosphere is polluted and darkened in the fourth trumpet catastrophe (Revelation 8:6-12).

Though many die during these catastrophic events (verse 11), God is impressing on mankind that life on the planet exists at His pleasure. As the apostle Paul told the Athenians, "in Him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). God is reminding the world in the only language everyone can understand that He, the Creator of life, can also take life away.

The calamities of the last three trumpets are then directed specifically toward the inhabitants of the earth, rather than just toward their surroundings: "And I looked, and I heard an angel flying through the midst of heaven, saying with a loud voice, 'Woe, woe, woe to the inhabitants of the earth, because of the remaining blasts of the trumpet of the three angels who are about to sound!'" (Revelation 8:13). Now God begins to punish people directly.

Under the punishments of the fifth trumpet, men are not killed but are tormented "for five months. Their torment was like the torment of a scorpion when it strikes a man" (Revelation 9:5).

Then the command is given "to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, 'Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates.' So the four angels, who had been prepared for the hour and day and month and year, were released to kill a third of mankind. Now the number of the army of the horsemen was two hundred million" (Revelation 9:14-16).

Though these prophecies are couched in symbolic language, the astounding number of deaths caused by smoke, fire and brimstone indicate that the world's armies will finally unleash their horrifying weapons of mass destruction. God will allow this to happen. Then the massive devastation of human life will begin.

The indescribable carnage from the warfare is part of God's judgments on rebellious mankind. Shortly, His angels will also release "the seven last plagues" in which "the wrath of God is complete" (Revelation 15:1). This time coincides with Christ's warning that nothing would survive if He did not return (Matthew 24:22).

A triumphant announcement

Finally, the most important event of all occurs at the time the final trumpet is blown: "Then the seventh angel sounded: And there were loud voices in heaven, saying, 'The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!'" (Revelation 11:15).

At that time Christ will "destroy those who destroy the earth" (verse 18). This includes that entire system called Babylon the Great, whose satanic roots thread back to the dawn of human history: "Then a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea, saying, 'Thus with violence the great city Babylon shall be thrown down, and shall not be found anymore'" (Revelation 18:21).

John describes Christ's victory at Jerusalem in the Valley of Jehoshaphat (see also Joel 3:2, 12-14) in the accompanying battle: "Now I saw [in a vision] heaven opened, and behold, a white horse. And He who sat on him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war ... And I saw the beast, the kings of the earth, and their armies, gathered together to make war against Him who sat on the horse and against His army.

"Then the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who worked signs in his presence, by which he deceived those who received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped his image. These two were cast alive into the lake of fire burning with brimstone. And the rest were killed with the sword which proceeded from the mouth of Him who sat on the horse. And all the birds were filled with their flesh" (Revelation 19:11-21).

Something else must happen before Jesus Christ can begin His earthly reign: Satan must be restrained and removed from his dominance over the world. "Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. He laid hold of the dragon, that serpent of old, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years" (Revelation 20:1-2).

With organized opposition removed, Christ will then begin the work of bringing genuine peace and righteousness to mankind. In the next chapter we will see God's prophets' description of the incredible world Jesus Christ will build as He restores the rule and ways of God.

The Coming "Abomination of Desolation"

In His most detailed prophecy of the end time, Jesus said, "When you see the 'abomination of desolation,' spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place…, then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains" (Matthew 24:15-16). What was He talking about?

He was referring to Daniel 11, which foretold what would occu" in the powers that would vie for control of the Holy Land for centuries to come. For much of the prophecy these kingdoms were Syria to the north and Egypt to the south, both under Greek rulers following Alexander the Great. Eventually the prophecy describes one of these rulers from Syria, Antiochus IV, also known as Antiochus Epiphanes. He would "act deceitfully" by a false peace agreement with the Jews and later come "in rage against the holy covenant, and do damage" (Daniel 11:23-24, 30).

The apocryphal book of 1 Maccabees, although not Scripture, provides us with history of the period. It describes how Antiochus set himself against the Jews, massacred many of them and plundered the temple at Jerusalem (1 Maccabees 1:20-33).

The temple defiled

Then came the worst. Daniel's prophecy warned of Antiochus: "And they shall defile the sanctuary fortress; then they shall take away the daily sacrifices, and place there the abomination of desolation" (Daniel 11:31).

The book of 1 Maccabees gives us details: "Antiochus now issued a decree that all nations in his empire should abandon their own customs and become one people. All the Gentiles and even many of the Israelites submitted to this decree. They adopted the official pagan religion, offered sacrifices to idols, and no longer observed the Sabbath.

"The king also sent messengers with a decree to Jerusalem and all the towns of Judea, ordering the people to follow customs that were foreign to the country. He ordered them not to offer burnt offerings, grain offerings, or wine offerings in the Temple, and commanded them to treat Sabbaths and festivals as ordinary work days.

"They were even ordered to defile the Temple and the holy things in it. They were commanded to build pagan altars, temples, and shrines, and to sacrifice pigs and other unclean animals there. They were forbidden to circumcise their sons and were required to make themselves… unclean in every way they could, so that they would forget the Law which the Lord had given through Moses and would disobey all its commands. The penalty for disobeying the king's decree was death" (1 Maccabees 1:41-50, Today's English Version).

Then it happened: "On the fifteenth day of the month Kislev in the year 145" (verse 54, TEV), which corresponds to 168/167 B.C., "they set up the abomination of desolation upon the altar" of the temple (verse 54, KJV). This appears to have been a pagan altar, probably with an image representing the Greek chief god Zeus, as 2 Maccabees 6:2 tells us that Antiochus defiled the Jewish temple "by dedicating it to the Olympian god Zeus" (TEV). After all, to the Greek mind the God of the Hebrews simply equated to the chief god in the Greeks' pantheon.

We are further told: "Pagan sacrifices were offered in front of houses and in the streets. Any books of the Law which were found were torn up and burned, and anyone who was caught with a copy of the sacred books or who obeyed the Law was put to death by order of the king…On the twenty-fifth of the month, these same evil people offered sacrifices on the pagan altar erected on top of the altar in the Temple" (1 Maccabees 1:55-59, TEV). Indeed, pigs, declared unclean in God's law (Deuteronomy 14:8), were offered over His own altar.

The account in 1 Maccabees 1:60 continues: "Mothers who had allowed their babies to be circumcised were put to death in accordance with the king's decree. Their babies were hung around their necks, and their families and those who had circumcised them were put to death" (TEV).

Yet, as horrible as this was, some still resisted. In fact, 1 Maccabees 1:62-63 reports: "But many in Israel stood firm…They chose to die rather than to be defiled by food or to profane the holy covenant; and they did die. Very great wrath came upon Israel" (New Revised Standard Version).

Yet many in the resistance lived. The account continues with the rise of the Hasmonean priestly family of Mattathias, including his son and successor Judas Maccabeus, who would not compromise with paganism. In the end, the efforts of these patriots and their followers were in large measure responsible for eventually pushing out the Syrians.

Later prophetic fulfillment

Now, with all of that as history, consider Christ's warning about the abomination of desolation. When He gave it, this part of Daniel's prophecy had been fulfilled almost 200 years earlier. So Daniel's prophecy, according to Jesus, must have a dual fulfillment.

Jesus revealed to us the time for this prophecy's ultimate fulfillment in Matthew 24:21 when He explained what would immediately follow it: "For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time."

This recalls another part of Daniel's prophecy, that in the end time "there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation, even to that time" (Daniel 12:1). So this period of tribulation occurs at the end of this age, just before Christ's return.

Lessons from the first fulfillment

We can learn a great deal about this end-time prophecy from the original abomination of desolation Daniel foretold. Antiochus Epiphanes was a forerunner of the end-time king of the North, the world dictator the book of Revelation refers to as the "beast." No doubt this end-time ruler will employ the same deceitful and underhanded methods that marked the reign of Antiochus.

Furthermore, it appears from what we've seen and other scriptural indications that the end-time ruler will feign overtures of peace to the Jews of the modern nation of Israel.

What other parallels do we see? Part of the "abomination" of Antiochus involved the cessation of the daily temple sacrifices (verse 31). Yet Daniel's prophecy makes it clear that sacrifices will again be ended in conjunction with the abomination of desolation to come (Daniel 12:9-13). For this prophecy to be fulfilled, it appears that sacrifices will again be instituted and an altar rebuilt before the return of Jesus the Messiah.

In another parallel, Antiochus defiled the ancient holy temple when he erected an idol of the pagan god Zeus and sacrificed swine there. The end-time abomination may also involve an idolatrous image at a new temple. What we know for certain is that within the "temple of God" there will be an actual person who claims to be God in the flesh (2 Thessalonians 2:1-12).

Christ will destroy this religious figure at His second coming (verses 5-8), but not before many have been deceived with "power, signs, and lying wonders" (verses 9-12).

Also, just as the original abomination of desolation marked the beginning of a period of unparalleled horror and misery, so will the final one begin the time of the greatest horror ever, the coming Great Tribulation.

We can be thankful that God promises to send His Son back to earth to save mankind from self-annihilation in this coming horrible time of mass deceit and destruction. Indeed, as world events march ever closer to the fulfillment of these prophecies, let us draw closer to God in faith, trusting Him to see us through even the worst of times, knowing that we aren't left without foreknowledge to help us better understand end-time events.

What Is 'the Lord's Day'?

Some people mistakenly assume that, when the apostle John wrote that he "was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day" (Revelation 1:10), he was worshipping on Sunday and experienced the vision on that day. But nowhere does the Bible define "Lord's Day" as the first day of the week. If this were referring to a day of the week, we would have to conclude that John meant the seventh day, since God calls that day His "holy day...the holy day of the LORD" (Isaiah 58:13). Jesus Christ said He was the "Lord of the Sabbath" (Mark 2:28), not some other day of the week (compare Isaiah 58:13).

However, the context of John's vision shows that he wasn't referring to a day of the week at all. Instead, he wrote that the vision transported him forward into that time the Bible elsewhere calls the "day of the LORD," "day of the LORD Jesus Christ" and "day of Christ" (Jeremiah 46:10; Zephaniah 1:14; Acts 2:20; 1 Corinthians 1:8; 5:5; 2 Corinthians 1:14; 1 Thessalonians 5:2; 2 Thessalonians 2:2; 2 Peter 3:10).

These terms are not speaking of a specific 24-hour period. Instead, they refer to the end-time events surrounding the return of Jesus Christ, when He will personally and directly intervene in human affairs. Thus these terms indicate the end of the age of man's rule and the beginning of the age of Jesus Christ. This is the theme of the book of Revelation and "the Lord's Day" John saw in vision.

The Millennial Reign of Jesus Christ

Beyond the tumultuous times of today lies the promise of a transformed world of peace and plenty-the age of Christ's glorious reign on the earth!

When Jesus Christ returns to earth He will initiate "the time of universal restoration that God announced long ago through his holy prophets" (Acts 3:21, NRSV). Those prophets consistently assured ancient Israel and Judah that a righteous King would restore God's Kingdom to earth.

The prophets reveal the exact spot to which the Messiah, God's anointed King, will return: "And in that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which faces Jerusalem on the east" (Zechariah 14:4). Starting with Jerusalem as His capital city, He will expand His reign to the world (verses 9).

Once God's Kingdom is established in Jerusalem among the people of Israel, Christ will ask representatives of all nations to come to Jerusalem to learn about His laws. He will summon them to Jerusalem to attend God's annual Feast of Tabernacles: "And it shall come to pass that everyone who is left of all the nations which came against Jerusalem shall go up from year to year to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and to keep the Feast of Tabernacles" (verse 16; see Leviticus 23:33-44).

Not all nations will immediately cooperate. Remember, Satan will have organized these same nations to fight Christ at His return. They will not quickly accept Him even after Satan is bound. Therefore Christ will "judge between the nations, and rebuke many people" (Isaiah 2:4). Early in Christ's reign, strong measures still will be necessary to convince most nations that He intends to enforce the laws of God.

How will He make this clear, especially to nations who obstinately refuse to attend the Feast of Tabernacles? His means of communicating His message to them will be straightforward. He will simply demonstrate His control over the natural forces of earth. "And it shall be that whichever of the families of the earth do not come up to Jerusalem to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, on them there will be no rain" (Zechariah 14:17).

The nations will quickly learn that their existence depends on God's blessing. Good weather and bountiful crops are blessings from God. From this time forward only nations that obey God will reap those blessings. All others will not. Such a system will serve as a convincing argument. In time, all nations will respond.

Let's now examine some of the specifics of Christ's reign.

Rewarding the saints

Jesus Christ has promised to reward people who through the ages have faithfully served Him (Revelation 11:18; 22:12). Notice their part in His Kingdom: "Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years" (Revelation 20:6). This future

period is often simply called the Millennium (a 1,000-year span).

From the beginning of Christ's millennial reign the faithful servants of God—including many who will have suffered severe persecution and martyrdom—will serve as the teachers and administrators of that wonderful world to come. They will assist Jesus in teaching the ways of peace and righteousness to the nations. This will fulfill Christ's promise to His Church: "To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne" (Revelation 3:21).

The prophet Daniel foretold the same thing: "Then the kingdom and dominion, and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven, shall be given to the people, the saints of the Most High. His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey Him" (Daniel 7:27).

Christ does not plan to change the world single-handedly. At His coming His faithful servants will be immediately transformed from flesh and blood into immortal spirit beings who can assist Him. Paul explained:

"Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit in-corruption. Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on in-corruption, and this mortal must put on immortality" (1 Corinthians 15:50-53).

These transformed beings will sit with Jesus Christ on His throne. They will serve with Him as teachers and administrators during His millennial reign.

The restoration of all Israel

Long ago God also promised: "The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch [his descendant, the Messiah], and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety" (Jeremiah 23:5-6, NRSV).

The restoration of all of the tribes of Israel as one nation under the reign of the Messiah is foretold again and again in the writings of the prophets.

Through Ezekiel God says: "Surely I will take the children of Israel from among the nations, wherever they have gone, and will gather them from every side and bring them into their own land; and I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel; and one king shall be king over them all; they shall no longer be two nations, nor shall they ever be divided into two kingdoms again" (Ezekiel 37:21-22).

And through Jeremiah: "Now therefore, thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning this city [Jerusalem] of which you say, 'It shall be delivered into the hand of the king of Babylon by the sword, by the famine, and by the pestilence': 'Behold, I will gather them out of all countries where I have driven them in My anger, in My fury, and in great wrath; I will bring them back to this place, and I will cause them to dwell safely. They shall be My people, and I will be their God; then I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear Me forever'" (Jeremiah

32:36-39).

Since Christ will establish Jerusalem as His capital, the first people to experience the effects of His rule will be the restored kingdom of Israel. As their King, He will immediately establish a close working relationship with them: "Moreover I will make a covenant of peace with them, and it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; I will establish them and multiply them, and I will set My sanctuary in their midst...Indeed I will be their God, and they shall be My people. The nations also will know that I, the LORD, sanctify Israel, when My sanctuary is in their midst forevermore" (Ezekiel 37:26-28).

The people of Israel will play a necessary role in helping other nations implement God's ways. Once God has forgiven their sins, Jesus Christ will begin using a humbled and repentant Israel to spread the knowledge of God's law to other nations. The whole world will gradually come under the administration of a unified code of law, the law of God. Jesus will coordinate this as He reigns over the nations from Jerusalem. The world will finally learn to obey God's law.

Israel will help the nations learn God's ways

Concerning the restored nation of Israel during Christ's millennial reign, God says: "Behold ... I will heal them and reveal to them the abundance of peace and truth. And I will cause the captives of Judah and the captives of Israel to return, and will rebuild those places as at the first. I will cleanse them from all their iniquity by which they have sinned against Me, and I will pardon all their iniquities ... Then [Jerusalem] shall be to Me a name of joy, a praise, and an honor before all nations of the earth, who shall hear all the good that I do to them; they shall fear and tremble for all the goodness and all the prosperity that I provide for it" (Jeremiah 33:6-9).

As the people of Israel learn to follow God's ways, their example will inspire other nations to seek the same way of life and to want to reap the same blessings: "Yes, many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek the LORD of hosts in Jerusalem, and to pray before the LORD. Thus says the LORD of hosts: 'In those days ten men from every language of the nations shall grasp the sleeve of a Jewish man, saying, "Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you"'" (Zechariah 8:22-23).

Nations will see that keeping God's law works. They will come to Jerusalem to learn how they can apply it in their own lands: "Many nations shall come and say, 'Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths.' For out of Zion the law shall go forth, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem " (Micah 4:2). Eventually "the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea" (Isaiah 11:9).

The fruit of right knowledge

With Jesus Christ as King, Jerusalem will be the center of learning for the world. God's Word, the Bible, will provide a solid foundation for the development of education and knowledge:

"So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth...It shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it. For you shall go out with joy, and be led out with peace; the mountains and the hills shall

break forth into singing before you, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress tree, and instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle tree; and it shall be to the LORD for a name, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off" (Isaiah 55:11-13).

Prosperity will increase while crime and corruption will cease: "Instead of bronze I will bring gold, instead of iron I will bring silver, instead of wood, bronze, and instead of stones, iron. I will also make your officers peace, and your magistrates righteousness. Violence shall no longer be heard in your land, neither wasting nor destruction within your borders" (Isaiah 60:17-18).

It takes much more than mere knowledge, however, to produce lasting peace and cooperation. A spiritual change is also necessary. It will be that spiritual change in the people of Israel that will inspire other nations to admire their way of life and want to emulate it:

"O house of Israel,...for My holy name's sake...I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them" (Ezekiel 36:22-27).

The spiritual restoration of humanity is the most important transformation that will occur during this millennial period when the world is transformed. The Spirit of God will enable people to willingly and enthusiastically obey Him from the heart: "But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people" (Jeremiah 31:33; Hebrews 8:10).

God's Spirit will phenomenally transform people. Obedience will be widespread; people will exhibit honorable leadership and enjoy a stable society: "I will restore your judges as at the first, and your counselors as at the beginning. Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city" (Isaiah 1:26).

The changes will be permanent, lasting throughout subsequent generations: "Also your people shall all be righteous; they shall inherit the land forever ... that I may be glorified. A little one shall become a thousand, and a small one a strong nation. I, the LORD, will hasten it in its time" (Isaiah 60:21-22).

Each new generation will carry on this tradition of righteousness: "All your children shall be taught by the LORD, and great shall be the peace of your children" (Isaiah 54:13). People the world over will notice and respect their example: "Their descendants shall be known among the Gentiles, and their offspring among the people. All who see them shall acknowledge them, that they are the posterity whom the LORD has blessed" (Isaiah 61:9).

Spirituality spreads

As people from other nations see what happens in Jerusalem and its environs, they too will want to serve the living God: "Also the sons of the foreigner who join themselves to the LORD, to serve Him, and to love the name of the LORD, to be His servants—everyone who keeps from

defiling the Sabbath, and holds fast My covenant—even them I will bring to My holy mountain, and make them joyful in My house of prayer...For My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations" (Isaiah 56:6-7).

Finally the barriers between Israel and other nations will fall. This will occur because all will eventually realize "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

Physical blessings

As people the world over begin to obey God, first by getting their spiritual priorities straight, they will begin to experience unprecedented physical prosperity:

"'Behold, the days are coming,' says the LORD, 'when the plowman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him who sows seed; the mountains shall drip with sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it...They shall build the waste cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink wine from them; they shall also make gardens and eat fruit from them'" (Amos 9:13-14).

Isaiah compares this time to a perpetual feast with the best of everything: "On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear" (Isaiah 25:6, NRSV).

Notice this inspiring description of blessings yet to come: "They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the LORD—and their descendants as well.

"Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox ... They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord " (Isaiah 65:21-25, NRSV).

This vision of the millennial reign of Christ is not an illusion but a promise of reality. Jesus Christ will return to earth to spiritually transform its people and establish utopia, a paradise on earth. The combination of removing Satan's influence, giving humanity God's Spirit and teaching the world the laws and ways of God will produce 1,000 years of peace and a society blessed beyond its wildest dreams.

But, incredible as this sounds, prophecy reveals that an even more amazing period awaits mankind.

Beyond the Millennium

What happens after the Millennium, Jesus Christ's 1,000-year reign over mankind? This is when a truly astounding part of God's great plan comes to pass!

We have seen that Jesus Christ, assisted by His faithful servants, will transform the world after His return to earth. But, even after this 1,000-year reign of peace and prosperity, much important work lies ahead.

Jesus spoke of a time when the people of all nations would gather before Him. Why? So He can "separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats" (Matthew 25:32).

Notice the nature and result of this separation: "Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world'" (verses 33-34). "Then He will also say to those on the left hand, 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels'...These will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" (verse 41, 46).

How will this happen? Who will be involved in this judgment? Notice how Jesus Christ will perform the process of separating the wicked from the righteous. At the beginning of His reign He begins to judge between the nations, teaching them to turn from evil to righteousness (Isaiah 2:4).

Satan released for a short time

Also, the apostle John in Revelation describes his vision of the transition to Christ's reign in which he saw that an angel "seized the dragon, that ancient serpent who is the Devil, or Satan, and chained him up ... till the thousand years were ended." However, this is not the end of Satan's role in human affairs, because "after that he must be let loose for a little while" (Revelation 20:2-3, REB).

Notice what happens at the end of the Millennium: "When the thousand years are ended, Satan will be let loose from his prison, and he will come out to seduce the nations in the four quarters of the earth. He will muster them for war, the hosts of Gog and Magog, countless as the sands of the sea. They marched up over the breadth of the land and laid siege to the camp of God's people and the city He loves. But fire came down on them from heaven and consumed them. Their seducer, the Devil, was flung into the lake of fire and sulfur ..." (verses 7-10, REB).

Why would God release Satan to again seduce people after the wonderful 1,000-year reign of Jesus Christ? Though no specific explanation is given, a logical reason for this turn of events seems evident.

During the Millennium people will have the choice of only one way of life—the way Christ teaches them. Many generations will grow up without ever being exposed to any other way of life.

From the beginning, however, God has always allowed people to choose between good and evil (Deuteronomy 30:19). It would be a mistake to believe that no one born during the Millennium would ever choose the ways of Satan if the opportunity were available.

We can see from the events described in Revelation 20 that God will make that choice available to many people who will live during that 1,000-year era. It is also reasonable to believe that some of them will respond to Satan's intrigue and choose his selfish, rebellious ways over the cooperative and loving ways of God.

Sufficient numbers of people will make this choice to form a sizable army. "They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God's people, the city he loves. But fire came down from heaven and devoured them" (Revelation 20:9, NIV).

God has always tested His people to see what is in their hearts (Deuteronomy 8:2; 1 Thessalonians 2:4; Hebrews 11:17). We should not assume that those living during the Millennium will be treated differently. This will be a test that at least some of them will have to face. No doubt all who live during that 1,000 years will have the opportunity to see whether they will be faithful to God and His ways. The only example revealed to us, however, is that God will release Satan for a time.

Once this test is over, Satan will never again be allowed to deceive anyone.

The general resurrection of the dead

Now the greatest judgment of all must begin. As we read earlier, at Jesus Christ's return only His faithful saints will be resurrected. Prophecy reveals that "the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished" (Revelation 20:5). Another resurrection will take place after the Millennium!

The enormity of this event is difficult to convey, and its significance is hard to imagine. What is to happen to the unsaved billions of people who have ever lived? What is this time of judgment all about?

Now is the time for all other people—all those who lived from Adam's time up to the generation living into the Millennium at Christ's return—to learn the truth of God and enjoy the same opportunity for salvation given to those whom God called during the Millennium. They will all be raised from the dead with a marvelous opportunity to know God for the first time!

First, notice the description and setting of this resurrection: "Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it ..." (verse 11).

John, in vision, then witnessed an astounding sight: "And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books" (verse 12).

This is the resurrection of the "rest of the dead" mentioned earlier. In his vision John saw them stand before God's throne.

What does this mean? We must let the Bible explain itself. But first we need to understand the implication of certain critical words and expressions.

The word judgment does not have to imply a condemnation to death. It can just as well refer to an acquittal, the determination that a person should not be punished. Judgment is simply a process to decide who deserves a punishment or reward and who does not. The judgment described in Revelation 20 is just that—a separation of the wicked and the righteous. Some will be punished, but many more will have their names entered into the Book of Life.

What are the criteria for this judgment? Two factors are involved. These people are judged "by the things which were written in the books" and "according to their works" (verse 12). The Greek word translated "books," biblion, apparently refers here to the books in the Holy Scriptures, the Bible. Those in this resurrection are judged by the biblical criteria for righteousness.

Now, what "works" of theirs must be judged? This is important to understand.

The reason these people did not appear in the first resurrection is that they were not among the firstfruits who were first called, taught the truth of God and then judged to be worthy of eternal life in that earlier resurrection. God did not choose to call them to salvation in the previous age of man, when Peter spoke of conversion in terms of "as many as the Lord our God will call" (Acts 2:39). Contrary to popular belief, today is not the only day of salvation: "Now is ... a day of salvation" (2 Corinthians 6:2, Young's Literal Translation).

In many cases these people's past works would count against them. But other passages in the Bible explain that they will not be judged on past performance alone. They will be resurrected and given opportunity and time to repent and demonstrate their willingness to obey God. After all, most of these billions of resurrected men, women and children will have never known the true God or even heard of Jesus Christ and the Bible.

People from all human eras resurrected

Notice that Jesus says the people of His generation will rise in this resurrection along with people from other ages and other nations: "The queen of the South will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and indeed a greater than Solomon is here" (Matthew 12:42).

Jesus stated that "the queen of the South"—better known as the queen of Sheba, who lived in Solomon's time almost 1,000 years earlier—will be resurrected to life again with those who heard Christ preach in His day!

"And you, Capernaum, ... if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day ... It shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for you" (Matthew 11:23-24). Here Jesus said that those who had lived in Sodom—who were destroyed for their notorious depravity almost 2,000 years earlier—will be more willing to accept and obey Christ "in the day of judgment" than Jesus' own contemporaries.

This will be a truly remarkable time when people of all eras and nations are brought back to life to learn God's truth for the first time. Contrary to the common religious belief that people who

have never heard of Christ are condemned to hell or purgatory at death, the Bible reveals that all will have the opportunity to choose whether they will learn God's way, repent and receive God's gift of eternal life.

Details of this great resurrection

What will happen when these people come back to life for this time of judgment? The prophet Ezekiel gives us the answer. In a vision he sees a huge valley full of dried bones, all that remained of many long-dead people (Ezekiel 37:1-2). He is told, "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel . They indeed say, 'Our bones are dry, our hope is lost, and we ourselves are cut off!'" (verse 11).

Like most people, they probably believed that when a sinner dies all hope is lost for him. Through Ezekiel's dramatic vision, God corrects that false idea.

Here is what God reveals concerning this great mass of people who died without repentance: "'Behold, O My people, I will open your graves and cause you to come up from your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel. Then you shall know that I am the LORD, when I have opened your graves, O My people, and brought you up from your graves. I will put My Spirit in you, and you shall live, and ... you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken it and performed it,' says the LORD" (verses 12-14).

The purpose of this resurrection is to make God's Spirit available to these people so they can live, not to condemn or destroy them. Remember that "God our Savior ... desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:3-4).

This resurrection will make God's fervent desire possible. It will open the door so all people who have ever lived can be taught the truth and receive the opportunity to repent so they, too, can be saved.

This means that the judgment of that day will take time, enough time for people to change their lives, sufficient time for them to show clear evidence of repentance and prove themselves faithful to God.

Of course, patience is God's nature. He is also merciful. That is why Peter tells us, "The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). In His master plan of salvation, God has scheduled a time and opportunity for repentance for everyone.

God's judgment is complete

Any time of judgment involves decisions. At the end of this judgment period God will separate the last of the wicked from the righteous and destroy the wicked forever: "And they were judged, each one according to his works. Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire" (Revelation 20:13-15).

Unlike those raised to immortality in the first resurrection (verse 6; 1 Corinthians 15:50-53), the people in this resurrection are restored initially to physical, fleshly existence (Ezekiel 37:4-10). They are mortal, given temporary life with an opportunity to repent and choose God's way of life. Those in this resurrection who choose that way and ultimately remain faithful to Him will be given immortal spirit life in God's family, joining those in the first resurrection.

Some, however, will still refuse to repent and submit to God. They are subject to "the second death." Notice who will suffer this fate in the lake of fire: "The cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death" (Revelation 21:8).

This second death will be complete destruction from which no resurrection is possible. As Jesus Himself explained, all who do not repent will perish (Luke 13:2-5). The prophet Malachi explained the finality of this destruction: "'For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, and all the proud, yes, all who do wickedly will be stubble. And the day which is coming shall burn them up,' says the Lord of hosts, 'that will leave them neither root nor branch'" (Malachi 4:1).

Even in this, God is merciful. Rather than allowing some to live on in a life of sin and rebellion that will bring only sorrow and anguish to themselves and those around them, God will simply remove any source of potential suffering. Those who willingly refuse to repent and choose eternal life will be utterly destroyed, reduced to nothing but ashes (verse 3). This is a far more merciful and loving fate than that represented by the common misconception of the unrepentant tortured forever in an ever-burning hell.

A new heaven and a new earth

John's vision does not end with the lake of fire. He writes of what follows: "Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away" (Revelation 21:1).

The last two chapters of the book of Revelation present the vision the apostle John received of a marvelous renewal of heaven and earth. Who will inherit this "new heaven and new earth"? John quotes God giving the answer: "He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be My son" (verse 7).

These "children of God,...heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ" (Romans 8:17), will become like Jesus Christ is today (1 John 3:1-2) as co-owners of the wonderfully renewed heaven and earth.

As the apostle Paul explained, "the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18) when we "inherit all things."

This promised inheritance is made possible through Jesus Christ, "for whom are all things and by whom are all things," who plays a central role "in bringing many sons to glory" (Hebrews 2:10).

Paul comments on the nature of the glory we are destined to inherit: "The sun has a splendour

of its own, the moon another splendour, and the stars yet another; and one star differs from another in brightness. So it is with the resurrection of the dead: what is sown as a perishable thing is raised imperishable. Sown in humiliation, it is raised in glory; sown in weakness, it is raised in power; sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body" (1 Corinthians 15:41-44, REB).

The new heaven and new earth will be populated with the children of God who are miraculously changed into immortal spirit beings (verses 51-54).

The eternal family of God

The next thing John sees in his vision is a city, New Jerusalem, coming down from heaven as a gift from God. The city is described as "a bride adorned for her husband" (Revelation 21:2), a description that emphasizes the relationship of its inhabitants. It represents the eternal household or community of the children of God. The husband, or bridegroom, is Jesus Christ (Matthew 25:1), who is "the firstborn among many brethren" (Romans 8:29).

God the Father Himself dwells among them: "And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God" (Revelation 21:3). This community is God's family.

Residents of this city are the true "Israel of God" (Galatians 6:16). "Also she had a great and high wall with twelve gates, and twelve angels at the gates, and names written on them, which are the names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel" (Revelation 21:12).

In other words, they are the spiritual descendants of Abraham,"the father of all those who believe" (Romans 4:11; compare Galatians 3:29). For "by faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance ... He dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Hebrews 11:8-10).

The huge dimensions of the city indicate the awesome success Jesus Christ will have in bringing the overwhelming majority of people who have ever lived to repentance and salvation. "The city is laid out as a square; its length is as great as its breadth. And he measured the city with the reed: twelve thousand furlongs [1,500 miles, or 2,500 kilometers]. Its length, breadth, and height are equal" (Revelation 21:16).

God reveals here that the number of people who will come to repentance and receive eternal life will be like the stars in the heavens and the sand on the seashore—beyond the natural ability of any human being to count them. This is the blessing God promised to Abraham (Genesis 22:17).

The vision the apostle John received of this magnificent city provides us with a visual illustration of the family God is creating. God dwells in the midst of this city of His immortal, spirit children.

Another paradise

The biblical account of man begins in the Garden of Eden at the head of four rivers. In the midst of that garden God placed the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:8-15). Satan, the great deceiver, first persuaded Eve to sin, then Adam joined her. As a result of their rebellion against God's instruction, Adam and Eve chose to partake of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—a deadly mixture that has brought suffering and anguish to mankind ever since (Genesis 3:1-6).

The final chapter in the account of human destiny closes with a description of another garden. It surrounds the throne of God from which a river flows with the "water of life."

"And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, was the tree of life" (Revelation 22:1-2).

The fruit in this paradise is good. "And there shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve Him" (verse 3). All sorrow and suffering will be gone forever (Revelation 21:4).

You can know the future

At the outset we posed a question: Must we remain ignorant of our future? Now we can see that God provides us a clear picture of our destiny. But the decision is ours. We must choose whether we will turn from the ways of Satan and this present evil world (represented in the Garden of Eden by the tree of knowledge of good and evil) to the righteous ways of God (pictured by the tree of life).

How awesome it is to know the tremendous future God has planned for us! And with that comes the responsibility to choose Him and His ways and to remain committed, considering Jesus' words in Revelation 22:6-7 as He closes the vision of the new heaven and the new earth: "These words are faithful and true...Behold, I am coming quickly! Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book."