

# Fundamental Beliefs of the United Church of God *an International Association*

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## Preface

When the United Church of God, an International Association, was incorporated in 1995, 20 fundamental beliefs were identified and approved by the elders of the Church to be listed as part of its governing documents. We consider the teaching of these beliefs to be critical to building on the right foundation of a proper reverence for God's Word, especially as revealed in Jesus Christ (see Isaiah 66:2; Proverbs 1:7; 1 Corinthians 3:11).

The original 20 belief statements, some with minor edits for clarity, are presented in the pages that follow—each appearing as a summary paragraph at the beginning of a short chapter on the particular issue addressed. The additional material in each chapter provides further explanation and clarification.

The beliefs of the Church are not limited to those listed here. This booklet is not a comprehensive doctrinal compilation, but rather a broad summary of the Church's teachings. The belief statements and accompanying expansions on them in this booklet do not constitute full expositions of our teachings on the items covered here. We urge interested readers to download or request the booklet or booklets listed at the end of each section for a more detailed explanation of the teaching with thorough scriptural support. More information on the topics covered in this booklet can also be found using the search feature on our Web site at [www.ucg.org](http://www.ucg.org).

Explanations of other teachings of the United Church of God may be found in our other published literature and research papers. All such material is available online at our Web sites, and you may also request that copies of our booklets and reprint articles be sent to you by mail free of charge.

For specific inquiries or to be put in touch with one of our ministers in your area, feel free to contact us via our office for your area as listed at the end of this booklet.

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# God the Father, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit

*We believe in one God, the Father, eternally existing, who is a Spirit, a personal Being of supreme intelligence, knowledge, love, justice, power and authority. He, through Jesus Christ, is the Creator of the heavens and the earth and all that is in them. He is the Source of life and the One for whom human life exists. We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ of Nazareth, who is the Word and who has eternally existed. We believe that He is the Messiah, the Christ, the divine Son of the living God, conceived of the Holy Spirit, born in human flesh of the virgin Mary. We believe that it is by Him that God created all things, and that without Him was not anything made that was made. We believe in the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of God and of Christ. The Holy Spirit is the power of God and the Spirit of life eternal (2 Timothy 1:7; Ephesians 4:6; 1 Corinthians 8:6; John 1:1-4; Colossians 1:16).*

The existence of a Creator God of vast power and intelligence is so obvious from the universe around us that atheism, disbelief in God, is a denial of reality: “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse” (Romans 1:20, New International Version). Yet much detail regarding God’s attributes requires further revelation.

We understand that God is spirit (John 4:24), existing in a different realm from that of human beings, who are flesh. “As the heavens are higher than the earth,” so are His ways and thoughts higher than ours (Isaiah 55:9). Our understanding and perception of God, therefore, must be based on God’s revelation to mankind through His written Word, the Bible or Holy Scriptures.

The Bible reveals that God is the Sovereign of the universe, existing supremely above all else. God is eternal, unchanging in character, all-powerful, all-knowing and ever-present (Deuteronomy 33:27; Isaiah 57:15; Malachi 3:6; James 1:17; Job 42:2; Jeremiah 32:17; Psalm 147:5; 1 John 3:20; 2 Chronicles 2:6; Jeremiah 23:23-24).

Scripture further reveals God as two distinct divine Beings—God the “Father” and Jesus Christ His “Son.” (The Hebraic form of Jesus Christ is Yeshua the Messiah. The title Messiah or Christ—literally meaning “Anointed”—is that of the ruler of the lineage of King David who is

prophesied to serve as the chief divine representative in restoring Israel’s glory and reigning in righteousness over the world.)

Both the Old and New Testaments contain references to more than one divine personage (Psalm 110:1, for example, which is quoted in Acts 2:29-36). Again, the New Testament identifies Them as God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son (1 Corinthians 8:6). The Son is also called God (Hebrews 1:8-9).

As Father and Son, the one God is thus the one God *family*. The distinction between these two Beings existing together as God is implicit from the very beginning of Scripture (Genesis 1:1), where the Hebrew word *Elohim* is used. (*Elohim* is the plural form of the Hebrew word for God, *Eloah*.) There has been communication between these two from the beginning, as seen in the example of Genesis 1:26, where the pronouns *Us* and *Our* refer to *Elohim*.

The Old Testament focuses on the God of Israel, who identifies Himself as “I AM” and “the LORD God . . . of Abraham, . . . of Isaac, and . . . of Jacob” (Exodus 3:14-15). (The word *LORD* here is used in place of the Hebrew word spelled *YHWH*, which, like “I AM,” apparently denotes eternal and self-inherent existence.)

In John 8:58, Christ refers to Himself as “I Am.” Thus, the One the Israelites knew as God, who delivered them from Egypt and accompanied them in the wilderness, was later known in the New Testament as Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 10:4). The existence of the One whom Christ referred to as “the Father” was not well understood by many before Christ’s coming—though He is sometimes specifically referred to in the Old Testament.

Jesus Christ is called the “Word,” who “was *with* God” in the beginning and is also identified *as* “God” (John 1:1-2). All things were created through Him (verses 3, 10; Ephesians 3:9; Colossians 1:16; Hebrews 1:1-3), and He later became flesh and dwelled among human beings (John 1:14).

While in the flesh, the divine Word was emptied of divine glory and might, being human in the fullest sense—able to be tempted to sin (i.e., disobey God) but never sinning (Philippians 2:5-8; Hebrews 2:14, 17; 4:15). As a man, Jesus said that His miracle-working power came not from Himself but from God the Father (John 5:30; 14:10).

The relationship between the Word and the Father is more clearly defined in the New Testament, where Jesus came in the flesh as the Son of God, acted as the Father’s Spokesman (John 8:28; 12:49-50; 14:10) and revealed the Father to His disciples (Matthew 11:25-27).

The Father “gave His only begotten Son” in sacrifice as the “Lamb of God” for the forgiveness of our sins. After that Jesus was exalted by the Father to the glory They shared before the world existed (John 3:16; 1:29; 17:5). (See the chapters titled “The Sacrifice of Jesus Christ” and “The Passover,” beginning on pages 20 and 31.)

The New Testament emphasizes the unity between the “Father” and “Son,” yet makes the distinction between the two clear in numerous scriptures (see, for example, John 20:17; Romans 15:6). As noted above, God “created all things through Jesus Christ” (Ephesians 3:9, emphasis added throughout).

As distinct Beings, the Father and Son each have a glorious spirit body (John 4:24; 1 Corinthians 15:45; Philippians 3:21). These spirit bodies have form and shape, as Moses saw the “form of the LORD” (Numbers 12:8; see Exodus 33:18-23). God as spirit is not visible to human beings (Colossians 1:15; 1 Timothy 1:17)—unless supernaturally manifested.

Yet when God does appear or show Himself in vision, He has “the appearance of a man” (Ezekiel 1:26), though brilliant and radiant, being “the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD” (verse 28; see also Revelation 1:12-16). Human beings were patterned after the form of God on a physical level (Genesis 1:26-27; 5:1-3).

The relationship between the Father and the Son demonstrates God’s perfect and eternal way of life of love—outflowing concern for others. God is the embodiment of love (1 John 4:8, 16). The Father has always loved the Son, and the Son has always loved the Father (John 17:4, 20-26). The harmony between the Father and the Son is a singleness of mind and purpose, which Jesus Christ asked the Father to bring about among His disciples, Himself and the Father (verses 20-23).

“God,” as used in the Bible, can be a reference to either the Father (e.g., Acts 13:33; Galatians 4:6), Jesus Christ the Son (e.g., Isaiah 9:6; John 1:1, 14) or both (e.g., Romans 8:9), depending on the context of the scriptures.

The power that proceeds from God is called the Spirit of God or the Holy Spirit (Isaiah 11:2; Luke 1:35; Acts 1:8; 10:38; 2 Corinthians 1:22; 2 Timothy 1:7). It is through this Spirit that God is present everywhere at once (Psalm 139:7-10).

The Holy Spirit of God is not identified as a third person in a trinity but is presented in Scripture as the power of God, the mind of God and the very essence and life force of God through which the Father begets human beings as His spiritual children. The Holy Spirit is given to individuals when they genuinely repent and are baptized (Acts 2:38).

That Spirit is also “a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession” (Ephesians 1:14, NIV) at the resurrection of the righteous to eternal life at Jesus Christ’s return (1 Thessalonians 4:16). This Spirit makes those who receive it “the children of God” in the family of God, sharing in the divine nature (Romans 8:16, KJV; 2 Peter 1:4).

Human beings are also called *elohim* or “gods” in Scripture in reference to the ultimate purpose for our creation (Psalm 82:6; John 10:34-36). God is in the process of expanding the divine family beyond the Father and Son.

Ephesians 3:14-15 refers to “the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named.”

Jesus is called “the firstborn among many brethren” (Romans 8:29). Human beings have the wonderful potential to enter the God family and be transformed into the same kind of beings the Father and Christ now are (Romans 8:14, 19; John 1:12; 1 John 3:1-2). (See the chapters titled “Humanity” and “God’s Purpose for Mankind,” beginning on pages 12 and 46.)

God wants us to come to know Him so we can have confidence in Him and love Him. He has disclosed much about Himself through the names, titles and descriptions He revealed to those with whom He worked in past ages.

These reveal that God possesses supreme intelligence, power, glory and wisdom (Genesis 14:19, 22; 16:13; Psalms 29:3; 47:2; Isaiah 55:8-9; 1 Timothy 1:17; Jude 25); that He embodies all righteousness, perfection and truth (Deuteronomy 32:4; 2 Corinthians 13:11); that He possesses heaven and earth (Genesis 14:19, 22; Acts 17:24); that He is immortal (Genesis 21:33; 1 Timothy 1:17) and worthy of all praise (Psalm 18:3; Revelation 4:11).

God is our provider (Genesis 22:14; 1 Timothy 6:13, 17; James 1:5, 17), healer (Exodus 15:26), shield (Genesis 15:1; Psalm 59:11), defense (Psalms 18:2; 94:22), counselor (Isaiah 28:29), teacher (Psalm 25:4-5, 9; Isaiah 48:17), lawgiver (Isaiah 33:22; James 4:12), judge (Genesis 18:25; Psalm 50:6), strength (Psalms 18:2; 28:7; 59:17) and salvation (Psalms 27:1, 9; 68:20).

He is faithful, merciful, generous, patient, kind, just and compassionate (Exodus 34:5-7; Deuteronomy 7:9). God hears our prayers (Psalms 6:9; 34:17; 65:2), enters into a covenant relationship with us (Deuteronomy 29:12; Daniel 9:4), is a refuge in trouble (Psalm 9:9), gives us knowledge (Psalm 94:10) and desires to give us immortality that we might share eternal life with Him in His family and Kingdom (John 3:16; Luke 12:32).

Jesus Christ, besides being God the Son and our Elder Brother in God’s family, is also the living, active Head of the Church of God (Ephesians 5:23; Colossians 1:18), its Chief Apostle (Hebrews 3:1) and its Chief Shepherd or Pastor (1 Peter 5:4). He lives within repentant Christian believers through the Holy Spirit as our personal Savior (compare Galatians 2:20; John 14:23; 1 John 3:24). He sits at the right hand of God the Father in heaven as our High Priest (Hebrews 3:1; 4:14-15; 6:20), Intercessor (Romans 8:34) and Advocate (1 John 2:1). And we await His return as King of Kings and Lord of Lords to rule over all nations and serve as supreme Judge under the Father (Revelation 11:15; 17:14; 19:15-16; John 5:22, 27; 2 Corinthians 5:10). (See the chapter titled “Jesus Christ’s Return and Coming Reign,” beginning on page 60).

(For more details, download or request our free booklets *Life’s Ultimate Question: Does God Exist?, Who Is God?, Jesus Christ: The Real Story and What Is Your Destiny?*)

# The Word of God

*We believe that Scripture, both the Old and New Testament, is God's revelation and His complete expressed will to humanity. Scripture is inspired in thought and word, infallible in the original writings; is the supreme and final authority in faith and in life; and is the foundation of all truth (2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20-21; John 10:35; 17:17).*

The Old and New Testaments are unified in revealing God's plan of salvation and the working out of that plan in human history. The entire Bible reveals the acts of God's merciful intervention to save mankind for eternal life in His family. The writing in the various books of the Bible reflects the human writers' own personality, style and vocabulary. Nevertheless, they wrote as they were moved by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21). Thus God influenced and directed the minds of His servants while at the same time allowing them free expression as they wrote the books known as the Word of God.

The Holy Scriptures are the foundation of knowledge and truth that Jesus and the apostles used as a basic text for teaching God's way to salvation. First and foremost, Jesus Christ set the example of following the Scriptures as the ultimate authoritative text in a Christian's life. In successfully combating temptation from the ultimate enemy, Satan the Devil, Christ stated, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4; Luke 4:4; Deuteronomy 8:3). Christ also quoted other scriptures during His battle against the devil (Matthew 4:7, 10).

Jesus then began His earthly ministry by reading the Scriptures and declaring, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:16-21). In John 10:35 Christ proclaimed that "the Scripture cannot be broken." He referred to Scripture as an active, authoritative source in His life (John 7:38, 42). Nothing distracted Christ from His focus on the Scriptures—neither betrayal, nor being crucified (John 13:18; 17:12; 19:28; Matthew 27:46; Psalm 22:1; Luke 23:46; Psalm 31:5).

The apostles followed the example of Christ. The core of Christian faith, doctrine and behavior continued to be defined through the Scriptures. The resurrected Jesus Christ resumed His personal instruction to His disciples as He "opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures" (Luke 24:32, 44-45). It was through the Scriptures that disciples began to be made of people in all nations, as in the example of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-35).

Paul, the apostle chosen to bear Christ's name to both gentiles (non-

Israelites) and Israelites (Acts 9:15), appealed to the authority of the Scriptures by asking questions such as "What does the Scripture say?" (Romans 4:3; 11:2; Galatians 4:30). At other times, Paul confirmed his position on particular matters by declaring, "For the Scripture says . . .," or through similar statements (Romans 10:11; Galatians 3:8, 22; 1 Timothy 5:18). Paul's writings show that he repeatedly quoted or referred to Old Testament passages to back up his teaching. Clearly the Old and New Testaments were written for both Jewish and gentile Christians.

There is a continuity between the Old and New Testaments (Matthew 4:4; 2 Timothy 3:15-16). The New Testament builds on and amplifies the Old (Matthew 5-7). History shows that the only Scripture that existed during the ministry of Christ and the early decades of the apostles was what we today call the Old Testament.

Reading, hearing and doing God's Word are key characteristics of God's people (Luke 8:21; 11:28). The Word of God builds faith in a person's life (Romans 10:17; Colossians 3:16). God expects His people to diligently study His Word regularly for understanding, for personal edification and for guarding themselves in an ungodly society (Acts 17:11; Ephesians 6:17; 1 John 2:14; Psalm 119:9). Internalizing God's Word enables one to defend his faith (1 Peter 3:15). The Holy Scriptures are able to make us "wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 3:15).

The Bible is alive with timeless application in our daily life (Hebrews 4:12). Paul, while imprisoned, reminded Timothy that, though man can be restrained, the Word of God cannot (2 Timothy 2:8-9).

The Church of God maintains the biblical mandate to rely on God's Word in its quest for the truth. As stated in 2 Timothy 3:16, God's inspired Word establishes doctrine (teaching), refutes error, administers correction and gives instruction in the right way to live. The next verse says that through it "the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (verse 17).

The truth of the Bible not only teaches and guides God's people, but it also sanctifies or sets them apart (John 17:17). The Bible serves as an essential tool in Jesus Christ's relationship with His sanctified people, His Church, "that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word" (Ephesians 5:26).

Scripture is intended to bring us into a relationship with the One who inspired what is written in it—the personal, incarnate Word of God, Jesus Christ, on behalf of God the Father (John 1:1-3, 14). (See the chapter titled "God the Father, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit," beginning on page 4.) Christ pointedly told the people of His day: "You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life" (John 5:39-40).



It is not enough to just read and study when it comes to the Bible—or to just try to follow many of its directives. We must be led to know, serve and rely on the God revealed in its pages—the Father through His Son, Jesus Christ the Word.

(For more details, download or request *Is the Bible True? and How to Understand the Bible.*)

## Satan the Devil

*We believe that Satan is a spirit being who is the adversary of God and the children of God; Satan has been given dominion over the world for a specific time; Satan has deceived humanity into rejecting God and His law; Satan has ruled by deception with the aid of a host of demons who are rebellious angels, spirit beings who followed Satan in his rebellion (Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 8:12; 2 Timothy 2:26; John 12:31; 16:11; Revelation 12:4, 9; 20:1-3, 7, 10; Leviticus 16:21-22; 2 Corinthians 4:4; 11:14; Ephesians 2:2).*

Before the physical realm, God created powerful spirit servants who are referred to in Scripture as angels, literally meaning “messengers” (Hebrews 1:7, 14). Described in some verses as “sons of God” by virtue of their creation by God, they witnessed the formation of the earth (Job 38:4-7).

There are hundreds of millions of righteous angels serving God (Revelation 5:11). But a large contingent of angels rebelled against God prior to the creation of mankind. They chose the way of vanity and selfishness instead of God’s way of outflowing love for others. (See the chapter titled “God’s Law and Sin,” beginning on page 16.) The leader of this rebellion is now known as Satan. He and his evil cohorts are referred to in the New Testament as unclean spirits or as demons.

Satan is the adversary of God, as the name *Satan* actually means “adversary” in the Hebrew of the Old Testament. The Greek Septuagint translation of the Old Testament renders this word as *diabolos*, from which we get the English word *devil*. It means “slanderer” and can have the sense of an accuser or opponent in court (compare Zechariah 3:1). Both the Hebrew and Greek terms are used in the New Testament.

The devil opposes God continually at every opportunity. He despises God’s plan, particularly its objective of adding human beings to God’s family. Hence, Satan also detests human beings. He is the deceiver and accuser

of the brethren (Revelation 12:9-10). He is a murderer and a liar and the father of lying (John 8:44). He is described figuratively as a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter 5:8).

Satan is not an ordinary opponent. He is an extremely resourceful and cunning adversary whose ultimate goal is to deny salvation to mankind by deceiving people, leading them astray, enticing them to sin and turning them against God (Ephesians 6:11-18; 2 Corinthians 2:11; Luke 8:12).

As the book of Job demonstrates, Satan can act only within the limits permitted by God (Job 1:12; 2:6). Job’s account also illustrates Satan’s accusatory attitude and clearly describes him as a specific individual personality and literal being. As the New Testament shows, he later came to Jesus Christ as a literal being in an unsuccessful effort to tempt Jesus into selfish concern (Matthew 4:1-11).

Just as Satan’s actions are limited by God’s will, his time is also limited. He is presently “the ruler of this world” (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11) and described as “the god of this age” (2 Corinthians 4:4), but his reign will come to an end at the seventh and last trumpet when Jesus Christ returns (1 Corinthians 15:52; 1 Thessalonians 4:16; Revelation 11:15).

Satan will then be removed and bound throughout the millennial reign of the Messiah but will be released for a short while at the end of the 1,000 years (Revelation 20:1-3, 7-8). After that he will be permanently removed when he is “cast into the lake of fire and brimstone” (verse 10), which is “prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matthew 25:41).

Satan was created as an angel of high position and authority. In Isaiah 14:12 he is called in Hebrew *Heylel*, followed by the distinction “son of the morning.” The Latin translation of the name here is given as *Lucifer*, a name for the planet Venus when appearing as the morning star, meaning “light bearer.” Some versions therefore translate the words here as “star of the morning,” “bright star” or “morning star” (New American Standard Bible, Revised English Bible, New International Version).

Addressed in Ezekiel 28 as the “king of Tyre,” as he is the unseen power behind the throne of earthly kingdoms, this being was initially an “anointed cherub who covers” (verses 14, 16), one of two angelic beings whose wings were stretched out over the throne of God, as represented in the earthly copy, the Ark of the Covenant (see Exodus 25:20-21; Hebrews 9:23-24; Revelation 11:19). He evidently had at least equal rank with Michael, an “archangel” and “great prince” (Jude 9; Daniel 12:1).

Lucifer was created perfect and blameless, but eventually chose the way of sin and rebellion (Ezekiel 28:12, 15, 17). Apparently a third of the angels followed him in his insurrection and with him attempted to overthrow God, but they were defeated and cast down to the earth (Revelation 12:4; Luke 10:18; Isaiah 14:12-15; 2 Peter 2:4). The kingdom of Satan is

now characterized by darkness, not light, though Satan is able to deceptively present himself as an angel of light (Luke 22:53; Ephesians 6:12; Colossians 1:13; 2 Corinthians 11:14).

Under some circumstances, the devil and his demons are able to gain possession and control of human beings and even animals (Matthew 8:28-33; 9:32-34). Satan himself entered and possessed the traitor Judas (Luke 22:3). Christ, whose authority is greater than Satan's, cast out demons during His ministry on earth and has empowered His duly ordained servants to do the same (Mark 16:17).

Satan is referred to by different names and descriptions that denote some of his evil roles, characteristics and actions. Besides "the devil," he is also called Apollyon and Abaddon, meaning "destroyer" and "destruction," respectively (Revelation 9:11); Belial, meaning "worthless" or "wicked" (2 Corinthians 6:15); Beelzebub, the name of a Philistine god meaning "Lord of flies" (Matthew 12:24-27, compare 2 Kings 1); the great dragon and serpent (Revelation 12:9); the tempter (Matthew 4:3; 1 Thessalonians 3:5); and the prince of the power of the air (Ephesians 2:2).

(For more details, download or request *Is There Really a Devil?*)

## Humanity

*We believe that humanity was created in the image of God with the potential to become children of God, partakers of the divine nature. God formed humanity of flesh, which is material substance. Human beings live by the breath of life, are mortal, subject to corruption and decay, without eternal life, except as the gift of God under God's terms and conditions as expressed in the Bible. We believe that God placed before Adam and Eve the choice of eternal life through obedience to God or death through sin. Adam and Eve yielded to temptation and disobeyed God. As a result, sin entered the world and, through sin, death. Death now reigns over all humanity because all have sinned (Genesis 1:26; 2 Peter 1:4; Hebrews 9:27; 1 Corinthians 15:22; Romans 5:12; 6:23).*

The first chapter of the Holy Bible reveals that God created men and women in His image and likeness (Genesis 1:26-27). The context of this fact is important to understand. Nearly 6,000 years ago, God prepared this world for human habitation during a single week, as explained

in Genesis 1. In the several days prior to man's creation, God made different forms of life, each of which was to reproduce "according to its kind" (verses 11-12, 21, 24-25).

This principle rules out evolution as commonly understood—the idea that creatures evolved from one kind into another. (God designed the genetic code to allow limited changes within kinds, but not from one kind to another.)

After repeatedly stating that creatures were to reproduce according to their kind, God said He would make man *in His own* image and likeness (again, verses 26-27). The clear implication is that man was created according to the "God kind," so to speak, with God intending to reproduce Himself through human beings. In fact, Genesis 5:1-3 compares God having made Adam, the first man, in His own likeness to when "Adam begot a son in *his* own likeness, after *his* image, and named him Seth."

Humanity was, therefore, created with a truly amazing potential. The future of humanity, as explained elsewhere in Scripture, is to be children in the family of God (1 John 3:1-2; 2 Peter 1:4; 2 Corinthians 6:18). Yet human beings, as physical flesh-and-blood creatures, have initially been formed on a much lower level than God.

As first created, the "likeness" to God in man is quite restricted—limited to such areas as general resemblance in form, feelings, thought, creative abilities and the capacity to govern—all in a rather inferior sense as compared to God. However, God intends for man to ultimately come to share His divine glory, power, intelligence, wisdom and righteous, loving character. (See the chapters titled "God the Father, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit" and "God's Purpose for Mankind," beginning on pages 4 and 46.)

The character of Almighty God is perfect. He is inherently good and cannot sin. This is also what God desires for His children. Yet even God, who is all-powerful, does not create perfect character in human beings by simply willing that result. The development of righteous character requires a conscious decision by a being with free will to conduct his or her life based on knowledge of what is morally right and wrong, choosing what is right and rejecting what is wrong.

Again, when initially created our first human parents, Adam and Eve, received a life of physical, fleshly existence of limited duration. "And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being" (Genesis 2:7).

The Hebrew word *nephesh*, translated "being" in Genesis 2:7 (or "soul" in the King James Version), is used in the first chapter of Genesis four times in connection with animals (Genesis 1:20, 21, 24, 30) and is translated as "body" in the phrase "dead body" in Numbers 6:6. The first man was later told, "In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the

ground, for out of it you were taken; for dust you are, and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 3:19).

The biblical book of wisdom known as Ecclesiastes contains this exhortation: “Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going” (Ecclesiastes 9:10; see also verse 5). So there is no consciousness in death, which is compared elsewhere in Scripture to sleeping in total unawareness (see, for example, John 11:11-14; 1 Corinthians 11:30; 15:51; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14).

Human beings are mortal, subject to corruption and decay. They do not possess immortality in the form of an “immortal soul.” Rather, they start out *without* eternal life. A biblical prayer declares: “What profit is there in my blood, when I go down to the pit? Will the dust praise You? Will it declare Your truth?” (Psalm 30:9). Another states, “For in death there is no remembrance of You; in the grave who will give You thanks?” (Psalm 6:5). (See the chapter titled “The Resurrections and Eternal Judgment,” beginning on page 57.)

Human beings do have a spiritual component to their initial makeup—the human spirit (Job 32:8; Zechariah 12:1). It is this spirit that imparts intellect to the physical human brain, thereby giving the human mind abilities far beyond other physical creatures: “For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him?” (1 Corinthians 2:11).

Unconscious of itself apart from the body, this spirit returns to God at death (Ecclesiastes 12:7). In the future resurrection, God will place the spirits of those who have died into new bodies, returning them to conscious intelligence with their personalities and memories intact.

As initially formed, human beings are incomplete creations. God wants to share with them His very nature and enable them to become His literal spiritual children. This is only possible by His Holy Spirit joining with each person’s human spirit (Romans 8:16). This gives higher, godly understanding and imparts God’s character of love (1 Corinthians 2:10-16; Romans 5:5). It is through the Holy Spirit that God will transform us into beings who will, when resurrected or changed at Christ’s return, live with Him forever (Romans 8:11).

God desires to give to every human being the gift of eternal life as a member of His family. Eternal life is not something a person can earn. However, God will not grant this precious gift to anyone who does not yield to Him and His law (1 Corinthians 6:9-10).

In the Bible, eternal life in the family of God is called *salvation*, for those given immortality in that family will never again be subject to death. God reveals to us, through the divinely inspired Scriptures, that salvation is not automatically granted to every human being. He will bestow this blessing on

only those who have proven their willingness to obey Him (Revelation 21:7-8).

God was not obligated to elevate human beings to eternal life with Him in the spirit realm, but we know that God is love (1 John 4:8). Therefore, out of unselfish, outgoing concern, He has devised a plan whereby we can be given salvation, the greatest possible blessing a loving Creator can bestow (Luke 12:32).

When God created Adam and Eve, He gave them access to the tree of life, symbolic of eternal life (Genesis 2:9; 3:22). And He commanded them *not* to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which was symbolic of choosing, apart from God, to determine right and wrong for oneself.

But they disobeyed God’s command, which constitutes sin or lawlessness (1 John 3:4). And sin leads to death (Genesis 2:17; Ezekiel 18:4, 20; Romans 6:23). Every sin damages the character of the one who commits it. To commit sin harms both the individual sinner and society in general. (See the chapter titled “God’s Law and Sin,” beginning on page 16.)

Adam and Eve, like all human beings, were given freedom of choice, and under the influence of Satan they violated God’s explicit command (Genesis 3:1-6). (See the chapter titled “Satan the Devil,” beginning on page 10.) The first human beings thus began to live in a manner contrary to the will of their loving Creator, placing themselves under the penalty of death, about which God had warned them in advance. No human being except Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has lived a sinless life (Ecclesiastes 7:20; Romans 3:23; Hebrews 4:15).

In spite of human sinfulness, God’s ultimate plan for humankind has not been thwarted. In His omniscient wisdom and mercy, God has provided a means by which human beings can be reconciled to Him (John 3:16-17). People can still develop the godly character that is a prerequisite to receiving God’s most precious gift of eternal life as His children (1 Corinthians 15:22; Galatians 2:20). But apart from the deliverance God has provided, death reigns over all humanity because all have sinned (Romans 5:12).

God desires harmonious relationships—both between human beings and Himself and among human beings, between individuals and groups. Again, God is in the process of establishing His great family, which the physical human family is to portray. We also see this in the sacred institution of marriage. In creating Adam, God said it was not good for him to be alone (Genesis 2:18). Man needed companionship. So God made woman and established marriage (verses 21-25)—a covenant partnership between a man and a woman and with God (Matthew 19:4-6; Malachi 2:14).

The marriage relationship was intended to model the relationship that Jesus Christ would eventually have with the Church of God (Ephesians 5:22-23). And God also stated that husband and wife are made “one” to produce



godly offspring (Malachi 2:15). Marriage is a very serious commitment, safeguarded in the law of God. (Again, see the chapter titled “God’s Law and Sin,” beginning on page 16.)

(For more details, download or request *What Is Your Destiny?, Creation or Evolution: Does It Really Matter What You Believe?, What Happens After Death?, Heaven and Hell: What Does the Bible Really Teach? and Marriage and Family: The Missing Dimension.*)

## God’s Law and Sin

*We believe that sin is the transgression of the law. The law is spiritual, perfect, holy, just and good. The law defines God’s love and is based upon the two great principles of love toward God and love toward neighbor. It is immutable and binding. The Ten Commandments are the 10 points of God’s law of love. We believe that breaking any one point of the law brings upon a person the penalty of sin. We believe that this fundamental spiritual law reveals the only way to true life and the only possible way of happiness, peace and joy. All unhappiness, misery, anguish and woe have come from transgressing God’s law (1 John 3:4; 5:3; Matthew 5:17-19; 19:17-19; 22:37-40; James 2:10-11; Romans 2:5-9; 7:12-14; 13:8-10).*

There are ultimately two ways of life. One is the way of selflessness and outflowing concern for others—that is, the way of love, desiring to give and help. This is the way of God, who is the very embodiment of love (1 John 4:8, 16). His way of life is codified for human beings in His law, which expresses love (Romans 13:10; 1 John 5:3).

Opposed to this is the way of vanity and selfishness—striving to get for oneself. This approach constitutes violation of God’s law, which is sin (1 John 3:4). This is the way of Satan, his demons and, following their lead, mankind. (See the chapter titled “Satan the Devil,” beginning on page 10.)

Yet God created human beings to ultimately become members of His family, destined to inherit immortality and live in a harmonious relationship with Him and each other for eternity (Hebrews 2:6-13). To ultimately share eternity with God, we must also share His thoughts, agree with His approach, embrace His way of life and appreciate and uphold His values as expressed by His law (Philippians 2:5-13).

God’s written revelation to mankind, the Holy Scriptures, reveals this essential knowledge to us through His laws and teachings (2 Timothy 3:15-17). This forms the basis for the everlasting relationship God desires to have with us. Therefore it is imperative that anyone who seeks this ultimate relationship with God heed the directives of God’s law as revealed in His Word.

Within the broad principle of love, Jesus Christ in Matthew 22:37-40 summarized God’s law in two great commandments from the Old Testament: “‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind [from Deuteronomy 6:5].’ This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself [from Leviticus 19:18].’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

These two commandments summarize the more specific delineation found in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20; Deuteronomy 5). The first four of these commandments concern showing love toward God. The last six concern love toward neighbor—one’s fellow man. We should understand these commands as summary principles as well, rather than limiting each to the strict wording in the verses where they are listed.

Part of Jesus’ purpose in coming to earth was to “magnify the law” (Isaiah 42:21, King James Version). An important way He did this was by showing the full spiritual intent of God’s commandments—both through His teachings and through His perfect example of obedience.

In His teaching, Jesus explained that God’s commandments apply well beyond the mere letter. They are to regulate even our thoughts. For instance, He explained that unjust rage against someone is breaking God’s Sixth Commandment against murder and that lusting after a person not one’s spouse is committing adultery in the heart, constituting a violation of the Seventh Commandment (Matthew 5:21-28).

God requires that we obey the spirit of each of the Ten Commandments. Starting with the first four on love toward God, the First Commandment against not worshipping other gods also means that we are not to allow anything to come before God in our lives.

The Second Commandment forbids worshipping before physical representations of God, like statues or pictures of Christ, but it also prohibits limiting God with a false image in one’s mind.

The Third Commandment says we are not to take God’s name in vain, which means we must be quite careful in how we use it, but also that we must not dishonor God’s reputation by how we live.

The Fourth Commandment, about keeping the Sabbath holy and not working on it, also includes the principle of structuring our workweek around it and maintaining a spiritual focus throughout the day. (See the chapter titled “The Sabbath Day,” beginning on page 29.)

Moving to the last six of the Ten Commandments on loving our neighbor, the Fifth Commandment tells us to honor our parents, which includes obeying them when young, respecting their wisdom when we are adults, caring for them when they are old and not bringing shame on one's family name. (Implicit in this command is also the need for parents to be honorable.)

The Sixth Commandment, as already mentioned, prohibits murder. In the letter this means not usurping God's prerogative in taking human life (as only He has the authority to do so or to command that someone else do so). We are not to murder self or help someone else to commit suicide, and we are not to commit abortion. In the spirit of the law, we are not to hate or devalue another person.

The Seventh Commandment, forbidding adultery, in its spiritual intent prohibits any sexual relations outside of marriage, as well as fantasizing about such relations. Thus sexual immorality in general, including premarital sex and homosexual relations, is forbidden, as detailed elsewhere in God's laws.

The Eighth Commandment, prohibiting stealing, in the spirit includes safeguarding what belongs to others and seeking honest gain in order to even share with others in need.

The Ninth Commandment, forbidding the bearing of false witness against one's neighbor, in its full intent includes protecting the reputation of others and maintaining complete honesty and integrity in all dealings—always telling the truth.

And finally, the Tenth Commandment, prohibiting coveting what belongs to a neighbor, is, even as expressed in the letter, a spiritual commandment about thoughts in one's mind. We must refrain from lusting after what we cannot lawfully obtain.

These commandments are further supported and clarified by other laws and instructions in Scripture. In fact, the entire Bible serves as God's revealed law to us, telling us what He requires. Yet sadly, man rejected God's law at the very outset of human history.

Sin, the transgression of the law, was introduced to humanity in the Garden of Eden. Satan lied to Adam and Eve concerning the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 3:4; John 8:44). Contrary to His deceptive prediction, the first man and woman did die. As their descendants, we all share the common condition of mortality (Hebrews 9:27).

It's no coincidence that sin's universal presence in all human beings (Romans 3:23) is connected to death and the withholding of God's gift, eternal life (Romans 6:23).

The pervasive nature of sin and death is demonstrated by the human tendency to disregard and disobey God's law (Romans 8:7). Self-deception frequently accompanies this departure from God's perfect guidelines

(Jeremiah 17:9; 10:23). The influence of Satan is unmistakable in this pattern, both directly (Ephesians 2:1-3) and indirectly through those he deceives (2 Corinthians 11:13-15).

Having become the adversary of God through his own rebellion, Satan has covertly enlisted the human race in his battle. Sinful human beings become enemies of God since all sin, in addition to its effect on other people, is by definition against God (Genesis 39:9; Psalm 51:4).

Violating any of God's instructions is sin (1 John 5:17), but it is also sinful to omit doing what one should do (James 4:17) or to violate one's conscience (Romans 14:23). Furthermore, sin is an enslaving power from which we need redemption and release (Romans 7:23-25). We are powerless to bring about this redemption on our own (1 Peter 1:18-19).

Since sin in any form brings about alienation from God (Isaiah 59:1-3; Ephesians 4:17-19) and eventual death, no amount of obedience following such conduct can reverse its effect, even though obedience is expected. Only the perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ can procure our release (Hebrews 2:14-15) and reconcile us to God. (See the chapters titled "The Sacrifice of Jesus Christ" and "Repentance and Faith," beginning on pages 20 and 24.)

Through forgiveness of sin, available by God's grace (Romans 3:24), a Christian finds freedom in obeying God's law (James 1:21-25). Rather than being enslaved to sin by disobedience, we serve God by obedience and walk the path He intends, to be led to eternal life in His Kingdom by His generous and undeserved gift (Romans 6:16-23).

To return to a former life of sin is a serious matter in the sight of God (2 Peter 2:20-22). However, the only sin that cannot be forgiven is the fully informed, willful refusal to repent, utterly rejecting God and the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, by which forgiveness of sin is made possible (Hebrews 6:4-6; 10:26-31).

This sin is described by Christ as "blasphemy against the Spirit" (Matthew 12:31), a knowing outright rejection of the power and authority of God. After every human being has had a full opportunity for salvation, those still unrepentant will be destroyed (Revelation 20:14-15), thus fulfilling the ultimate penalty of sin, the second death. (See the chapter titled "The Resurrections and Eternal Judgment," beginning on page 57.)

Although every person is responsible for his own sin (Ezekiel 18:4, 20), Satan the devil is identified as the tempter, the deceiver of mankind and the one ultimately responsible for leading humanity into sin (Matthew 4:3; 1 Thessalonians 3:5; Revelation 12:9; 20:1-3). (Again, see the chapter titled "Satan the Devil," beginning on page 10.)

(For more details, download or request *The Ten Commandments and The New Covenant: Does It Abolish God's Law?*)

# The Sacrifice of Jesus Christ

*We believe God so loved the world of helpless sinners that He gave His only begotten Son, who, though in all points tempted as we are, lived without sin in the human flesh. That Son, Jesus Christ, died as a sacrifice for the sins of humanity. His life, because He is the creator of all humanity, is of greater value than the sum total of all human life. His death is, therefore, sufficient to pay the penalty for every human being's sins. In paying this penalty He has made it possible, according to God's plan for each person and for humanity as a whole, for us to have our sins forgiven and to be released from the death penalty (Hebrews 4:15; 9:15; 10:12; John 1:18; 3:16; Colossians 1:16-17, 22; 1 John 2:2; 4:10; Ephesians 1:11; Revelation 13:8).*

Jesus Christ is the focal point of Christianity. As Acts 4:12 states, “Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” Forgiveness of sin and ultimately the gift of eternal life are available only through His sacrifice. We are reconciled to God by Christ’s death but saved by His life (Romans 5:9-10).

The Scriptures refer to Jesus Christ with several distinctive titles, including the Word of God (John 1:1, 14; Revelation 19:13), our Savior (1 John 4:14), our High Priest (Hebrews 9:11), our Lord (Revelation 22:21), the Son of God (Revelation 2:18; 1 John 5:5), our Passover (1 Corinthians 5:7), the Son of Man (Revelation 14:14), and King of Kings and Lord of Lords (Revelation 19:16). (See the chapter titled “God the Father, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit,” beginning on page 4.)

Christ is our Savior and the ultimate sacrifice for sin. Even though He was divine, Jesus became a human being to suffer and die for the sins of mankind (Philippians 2:5-7; Hebrews 2:9). As the Son of Man, He was human in the fullest sense, able to experience the trials of human life (Hebrews 4:15) to better empathize with us as our merciful High Priest (Hebrews 2:17).

Christ as our Savior gave His life that we might live. He died a horrible death, as our Passover (foreshadowed in the sacrificed Passover lamb in the Old Testament), that we might understand the magnitude of sin and the monumental significance of His sacrifice, which was made for every human being. He was “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29; compare Revelation 5:6, 12; 7:14; 12:11). (See the chapter titled “The Passover,” beginning on page 31.)

Sin, the transgression of God’s law (1 John 3:4), is truly horrible. Disobedience to God’s law has brought untold pain and misery as well as its ultimate penalty, death (Romans 6:23). (See the chapter titled “God’s Law and Sin,” beginning on page 16.)

Jesus lived a perfect life and therefore did not deserve the excruciating agony He experienced or the death penalty inflicted on Him. However, He was preordained from the foundation of the world to suffer and die for the sins of humanity. Even though Christ was *accused* of violating God’s law on more than one occasion, He, as the perfect sacrifice for sin, never broke God’s law.

We accept Christ’s sacrifice as essential to our salvation. As we model our lives after His, we figuratively “take up our cross” and follow Him (Luke 14:27), which includes a willingness to suffer and be persecuted as He set the example (1 Peter 2:19-23). We thank God the Father for giving up His Son Jesus Christ to be that perfect sacrifice for all mankind (John 3:16; Romans 8:32).

All sin is forgiven upon repentance and the acceptance of Christ’s sacrifice. (See the chapter titled “Repentance and Faith,” beginning on page 24.) Forgiveness of sin requires the supreme sacrifice—the death of Jesus Christ. His crucifixion almost 2,000 years ago was essential to God’s plan of redemption and salvation.

Through His sacrifice, Jesus took the ultimate penalty of sin—death—upon Himself, freeing us, if we accept His sacrifice in continuing repentance, from death being our final fate (Hebrews 2:9; 9:15). And by giving of Himself in life to care for others and finally through the agonizing torment He experienced at the end, Jesus also bore the other consequences of sin—pain and suffering.

As Isaiah 53:4 begins, “Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.” Matthew 8:17 renders this, “He Himself took our infirmities and bore our sicknesses.” And Isaiah 53:5 concludes, “The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed.” So Jesus endured brutality and misery as the basis for our release from suffering, including through healing.

While God does not remove all suffering now, just as He has not yet removed death from us, at times He will alleviate some of it now if we faithfully rely on Him—such as being physically healed of illness through anointing (James 5:13-16). And we have God’s promise that one day both death and suffering will be no more (1 Corinthians 15:54; Romans 8:18; Revelation 21:4).

By understanding and accepting Jesus Christ’s sacrifice in repentance and faith, we can be assured that our sins are blotted out. We can go forward in our Christian lives with confidence, knowing that through that sacrifice we can be reconciled to the Father.

As a result of this reconciliation, we can develop a relationship with our Father that provides hope and assurance for our future. We can experience healing today. We can also look forward to eternal life in the Kingdom of God as a gift of God's grace because of this tremendous sacrifice that Jesus and the Father willingly gave for every one of us.

(For more details, download or request *Jesus Christ: The Real Story, Who Is God? and God's Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind*.)

## Three Days and Three Nights

*We believe that the Father raised Jesus Christ from the dead after His body lay three days and three nights in the grave, thus making immortality possible for mortal man. He thereafter ascended into heaven, where He now sits at the right hand of God the Father as our High Priest and Advocate (1 Peter 1:17-21; 3:22; Matthew 12:40; 1 Corinthians 15:53; 2 Timothy 1:10; John 20:17; Hebrews 8:1; 12:2).*

One of the most dramatic, encouraging and gracious events of all time was the resurrection of Jesus Christ. God the Father resurrected His Son Jesus, who had been killed and placed in the tomb outside Jerusalem's walls. His death, allowed by the Father and willingly submitted to by Jesus (John 10:17-18), paid the penalty for all the sins of all human beings who will have ever lived, on the condition that they truly repent of those sins. His death was preordained by the Father and Himself from the foundation of the world as a necessary part of the salvation of mankind (1 Peter 1:20).

God, in His sovereign justice, mercy and love, thus made it possible for all human beings to have their sins forgiven (upon repentance and faith) and to be reconciled to Him by the blood of Christ as the Lamb of God (Matthew 26:28; Revelation 12:11). (See the chapters titled "The Sacrifice of Jesus Christ" and "Repentance and Faith," beginning on pages 20 and 24.) But the death of Jesus was not the end of the matter. We are reconciled to God by His death, but we are saved by His life (Romans 5:10).

Only through Christ's resurrection to immortality could we have a living

Savior who, as High Priest, intercedes for us with the Father (1 Timothy 2:5; Hebrews 4:15-16; Romans 8:26-27). And the fact that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead gives human beings a very compelling reason to believe in the gospel of the Kingdom of God and to believe that they also can be brought back from death (1 Corinthians 15:14-19). Christ's resurrection provides for human beings a solid basis for living in hope that they, too, may inherit eternal life (1 Peter 1:3).

Jesus offered the fact that the grave would hold Him for only a short period as the only divine sign to His generation that He was "greater than Jonah" and "greater than Solomon" and that His message should lead its hearers to repentance (Matthew 12:39-42). He said that He would be three days and three nights—a period of 72 hours (John 11:9-10; Genesis 1:5)—in the heart of the earth (the grave), just as the prophet Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the fish (Jonah 1:17). Elsewhere, Jesus said that He would "be killed, and after three days rise again" (Mark 8:31).

A major problem with the commonly accepted belief regarding the timing of the crucifixion and resurrection is that there are not three days and three nights between Good Friday afternoon and Easter Sunday morning.

The weight of scriptural and historical evidence leads us to conclude:

- That Jesus died on Wednesday afternoon;
- That His body was hurriedly placed in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea shortly before sunset that same afternoon—the eve of an annual Sabbath (a holy rest day), the first day of Unleavened Bread (John 19:30-31, 42; Mark 15:42-46);
- And that Jesus was resurrected by the Father near sunset on Saturday (the end of the weekly Sabbath), three days and three nights after being placed in the tomb, exactly as He had said.

This explanation is consistent with the details found in Scripture. It does not require a strained fitting of three days and three nights between Friday evening and Sunday morning at sunrise by speculating about parts of days and nights. It also reconciles the accounts of the women and the burial spices found in Mark 16:1 and Luke 23:56. In the first account, the women obediently rested on a Sabbath day *before procuring* the spices. In the second account, they prepared the already-procured spices and *afterward* rested on a Sabbath day.

These accounts are reconciled by understanding that there were *two Sabbath days* during the week in question. Jesus was crucified on the Passover (Matthew 26:18-20; 1 Corinthians 5:7), which was the preparation day for a Sabbath that was a "high day" (Mark 15:42; John 19:31). This high day was the first annual Holy Day on the Jewish calendar, the First Day of Unleavened Bread, which always fell on the day after the Passover (Leviticus 23:5-7). It was an *annual* Sabbath, not a weekly Sabbath. Annual Holy Days are also called "Sabbaths" since work was not to be done on them (verses 7, 24, 32).



The women waited until this day, the *annual Sabbath*, was over; then they bought and prepared the spices; then they rested *again* on God's *weekly Sabbath* day; and then they proceeded to the tomb to apply the spices to Jesus' body early on Sunday morning.

They visited the tomb after the holy "Sabbaths" (plural) of that week (Matthew 28:1, Green's Literal Translation). The annual Sabbath that year lasted from sunset Wednesday to sunset Thursday, and the weekly Sabbath, as always, lasted from sunset Friday to sunset Saturday. When they arrived at the tomb early Sunday morning, they found it empty and heard the announcement from the angel that Jesus was alive and was not there (Mark 16:6).

There is historical and scriptural evidence that points to A.D. 31 as the year of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. Among the indicators of the crucifixion year are the fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy of the coming of the Messiah (with a specified count of years in Daniel 9:24-26 evidently commencing with the decree of the Persian king Artaxerxes in Ezra 7), and a careful consideration of three milestones—the likely date of Jesus' birth, His age when He began His ministry and the duration of His ministry.

The Passover of the year Christ died fell on the fourth day of the week (sunset Tuesday to sunset Wednesday), and Jesus Christ's death on that day fulfilled His role as the true Passover Lamb of God (1 Corinthians 5:7). The next day, from sunset Wednesday to sunset Thursday, was a holy annual Sabbath.

In summary, we believe that Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, died for our sins on the Passover, was entombed for three days and three nights (72 hours) and then was resurrected and, after a period of further contact with the disciples, ascended to heaven to sit at the Father's right hand, far above all others in power, glory and honor (Ephesians 1:19-23). (See the chapter titled "God the Father, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit," beginning on page 4.)

(For more details, download or request *Jesus Christ: The Real Story and Holidays or Holy Days: Does It Matter Which Days We Observe?*)

## Repentance and Faith

*We believe that all who truly repent of their sins in full surrender and willing obedience to God, and who by faith accept Jesus Christ as their personal Savior, have their sins forgiven by an act of divine grace. Such individuals are justified, pardoned from the penalty of sin and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, which literally abides*

*within them and supplies the divine love that alone can fulfill the law and produce righteousness. They are baptized by the Spirit into the Body of Christ, which is the true Church of God. We believe in a true change in life and attitude. Only those who have the indwelling presence of, and are being led by, the Holy Spirit are Christ's (Acts 2:38; 3:19; 5:29-32; 2 Corinthians 7:10; John 3:16; Ephesians 1:7; 2:7-9; Romans 3:21-26; 5:5; 6:6; 8:4, 9-10, 14; 13:10; Jeremiah 33:8; John 14:16-17; 1 Corinthians 12:12-13; Philippians 2:3-5).*

Repentance from dead works and faith toward God are listed in Hebrews 6:1 as part of the foundation that ultimately leads to perfection and eternal life. Jesus Christ set an important pattern in His preaching when He regularly called on hearers to "repent, and believe" (Mark 1:15). The apostle Paul also preached "repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:21).

Jesus pointed out the importance of repentance when He twice stated that "unless you repent you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3, 5). God requires that everyone repent (Acts 17:30; 2 Peter 3:9). In the first recorded sermon in the New Testament Church, Peter told the people to "repent" (Acts 2:38).

We are to repent of sin, which is the transgression of God's law (1 John 3:4, KJV). Repentance goes beyond being sorry or showing remorse for one's past actions (2 Corinthians 7:8-11). True repentance involves recognition of our nature and its opposition to God (Romans 8:7). It requires a change, a complete and thorough turnaround in one's life, a change from sinning to ceasing from sin—from disobeying God's law to obeying it.

We are to stop going the way of the world and turn to God's way instead (Isaiah 55:7-8; Acts 26:20; Romans 12:2). Repentance is full surrender and willing obedience, based on the knowledge of how God wants us to live. (See the chapter titled "God's Law and Sin" beginning on page 16.)

Repentance begins with our crying out to God for forgiveness of our sins and our accepting Jesus Christ as personal Savior. It is not a decision based on emotion only, though emotion is certainly an important part (Acts 2:37), but a decision to sincerely obey God through faith in Jesus Christ. Christ's righteousness becomes ours through faith in and from Him (Philippians 3:8-9; Romans 8:1-4).

This faith is a deep belief and trusting confidence (Hebrews 11:1). And we can't come to God without it: "But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him" (verse 6). Such faith will lead to obeying God. It not only trusts in initial forgiveness of sin, but it recognizes

that God will help the faithful to remain faithful.

Repentance through faith is not simply compliance with a system of religion or a set of rules. Confidence in God and His ways will lead one to act in accordance with His will and to manifest works of righteousness (James 2:17-26). True godly repentance is not something that a person can work up by himself. It is a gift from God (2 Timothy 2:25; Acts 11:18). It is one of the many good things our Heavenly Father gives us (James 1:17). He leads us to repentance (Romans 2:4).

Repentance is a major part of the conversion process. As Peter continued in that first sermon, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). So repentance precedes baptism—the latter being an outward sign of our commitment to leave our old ways behind and embark on a new life, cleansed through Christ.

Then, after repentance and baptism, God’s Spirit is given to a person through the laying on of hands by a duly ordained servant of God (Acts 8:14-18; 2 Timothy 1:6; Hebrews 6:1-2). (See the chapter titled “Water Baptism and the Laying on of Hands,” beginning on page 27.) The Holy Spirit thereafter helps us to honor our commitment of repentance, leading us to actually live God’s way (Romans 8:14). We then have the love of God motivating us to keep God’s laws (1 John 5:3). True Christians have the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:9) and strive to live as Christ lived (1 John 2:6).

Repentance involves both sorrow and joy. Repentance leads to a joyful and eternal relationship with our loving God, our Creator and giver of life. Repentance focuses our vision on the love and mercy of God and the forgiveness of sin made possible by the sacrifice of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Repentance is necessary for putting off the “old man,” our former character, and becoming a part of the family of God (Ephesians 4:20-24).

And again, this is a response of faith. In Mark 1:15, quoted in part earlier, Jesus specifically called for people to “repent, and believe *in the gospel*”—referring to the good news of the Kingdom of God (verse 14). The expectation of being a part of God’s Kingdom is certainly reason to rejoice—and it motivates those who take it to heart to do God’s will.

Soon after godly repentance, one should, as we’ve seen, be baptized so that all past sins are blotted out (Romans 3:25), thereupon receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:37-38). Afterward comes a life *led* by God’s Spirit, growing in grace and knowledge, bearing fruit and being perfected in holiness and righteousness (2 Peter 3:18; Matthew 13:23; 2 Corinthians 7:1).

One important result of having the Holy Spirit within us is the development of faith (Galatians 5:22-23; 1 Corinthians 12:4, 9). “The faith of the Son of God” is what we now live by (Galatians 2:20, KJV). Indeed, the just (those who are justified or made right with God) live by faith (Habakkuk

2:4; Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38).

Repentance, we need to realize, must be ongoing. It is not a one-time action in the life of the believer. A converted person must continue to battle sin in his or her life (1 John 1:8-10; 2:1). Vestiges of human nature remain for the rest of our lives, warring against our minds and leading to sin (Romans 7:17, 20-21).

A spiritually converted person ultimately desires to please and obey God. The love of God poured into that person’s heart by the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5) seeks to follow the perfect way of God, but the weakness of the flesh often impedes this inward desire (Romans 7:12-25).

God does not condemn the believer (Romans 8:1) as long as he or she continues with God in the ongoing process of repenting and overcoming sin (Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21). Only if repentance permanently ceases is there no longer forgiveness. (Again, see the chapter titled “God’s Law and Sin,” beginning on page 16.)

The converted person continues through repentance and faith to rely on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ to cover his or her sins in this lifelong process of overcoming. And through the miraculous help of Christ living in him or her through the Holy Spirit, the Christian is able to grow in God’s way of life, increasingly walking by faith in obedience to God’s law of love (Galatians 2:20; Philippians 4:13; Colossians 1:29).

(For more details, download or request *The Road to Eternal Life, Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion and You Can Have Living Faith*.)

## Water Baptism and the Laying on of Hands

*We believe in the ordinance of water baptism by immersion after repentance. Through the laying on of hands, with prayer, the believer receives the Holy Spirit and becomes a part of the spiritual Body of Jesus Christ (Matthew 3:13, 16; John 3:23; Acts 2:38; 8:14-17; 19:5-6; 1 Corinthians 12:13).*

After repentance and faith in Hebrews 6:1, verse 2 lists “the doctrine of baptisms” and “laying on of hands” as two of the elementary principles of Christ.

John the Baptist introduced a baptism of repentance, tied to the concept of forgiveness of sins (Matthew 3:1-6; Mark 1:4-5). Jesus Himself was baptized by John (Matthew 3:13-17), not because He needed to repent of sin or be forgiven, but as an example for His disciples throughout all ages.

The English word *baptize* is derived from the Greek word *baptizo*, which means “to immerse.” By definition, then, the only biblical form of baptism is a complete immersion in water. John the Baptist chose a particular location in the Jordan River for baptizing because sufficient water was available there to completely submerge individuals (John 3:23).

For the Christian, the ordinance of baptism is profoundly important. In one action, Christ’s death, burial and resurrection are called to mind for the believer and linked to his or her own symbolic “death” and “resurrection” from the “watery grave” to walk in newness of life (Romans 6:3-6; Colossians 2:12-13).

Also inherent in the symbolism is the promise of the believer’s future resurrection into the Kingdom of God. The forgiven sinner emerges from the waters of baptism to live a new life in Christ, free from the death penalty incurred by sin. The waters of baptism have symbolically *washed away* all sins. In this regard, baptism is an outward acknowledgment of the believer’s inward intent to yield and submit his or her life to God and His way (Ephesians 4:20-24).

Baptism, which is commanded in Scripture, must be preceded by faith and repentance (Acts 2:37-38; Mark 16:16). The very symbolism of baptism itself shows a willingness to “bury” the old sinful life (Romans 6:11). Our acknowledgment of guilt and the need for Jesus Christ to save us from the consequences of sin is of paramount importance. This repentance is characterized by a change of heart and action and is based on personal faith in, and a total commitment to, Jesus Christ and God the Father (Luke 14:25-33; Colossians 2:12). (See the chapter titled “Repentance and Faith,” beginning on page 24.)

Baptism should be entered into only by someone who is mature enough to fully grasp and appreciate the lifelong commitment required. The Bible gives no indication that baptism is appropriate for children.

The commission Jesus gave His disciples includes the authority to baptize believers (Matthew 28:18-20). Baptism is followed by prayer and the laying on of hands by one or more of God’s duly ordained servants. This demonstrates that God acts through human servants and that we are to cooperate with the faithful ministry He has established in His Church. (See the chapter titled “The Church,” beginning on page 49.)

This is all part of the process by which we receive the gift of God’s Spirit (Acts 2:38; 8:14-18; 2 Timothy 1:6; Hebrews 6:1-2). It is through the indwelling Holy Spirit that Christ lives within the Christian (John 14:16-17,

23; Galatians 2:20). And through this process, the believer is placed into the spiritual Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12-13), bringing rejoicing in heaven (Luke 15:7).

Again, those who have come to repentance through the calling of God (John 6:44) are to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins, following the example and instruction of Jesus Christ. And with the laying on of hands, they will receive the Holy Spirit, empowering them to start living a transformed life led by that Spirit.

(For more details, download or request *The Road to Eternal Life and Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion*.)

## The Sabbath Day

*We believe that the seventh day of the week is the Sabbath of the Lord our God. On this day we are commanded to rest from our labors and worship God, following the teachings and example of Jesus, the apostles and the New Testament Church (Genesis 2:2-3; Exodus 20:8-11; 31:13-17; Leviticus 23:3; Isaiah 58:13; Hebrews 4:4-10; Mark 1:21; 2:27-28; 6:2; Acts 13:42-44; 17:2; 18:4; Luke 4:31).*

The weekly Sabbath day, the holy time of rest that falls every seven days—from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset—was made and set apart for man at the time of man’s creation. God blessed and sanctified the seventh day, and in it He rested from all His works of the creation week prior, as recorded in Genesis 1.

The sunset-to-sunset reckoning comes from the fact that the preceding six days each began in the evening (verses 5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31), and in Leviticus 23:32 God explains that He still reckons days this way. (The custom of beginning and ending days at midnight dates back to practices established in pagan Roman society and is contrary to God’s method of determining time.)

The first Sabbath was the day after the formation of the first man and woman, an ordained time for human beings to focus on a close personal relationship with their Maker (Genesis 1:26–2:3).

Jesus Christ declared Himself the Lord of the Sabbath (Mark 2:28), and indeed He is the One who actually instituted the Sabbath, God the Father having created all things through Him (John 1:1-3, 14; Colossians 1:16-17; Hebrews 1:1-2).

As Jesus also explained in the same instance, the Sabbath was intended to directly benefit *all* mankind—not just one particular cultural, religious or ethnic group (Mark 2:27). It is a very special time to deepen and broaden man’s devotion to and relationship with God. When we turn from seeking our own way, we find pleasure in that which pleases God (Isaiah 58:13-14).

God gave instructions concerning the observance of the Sabbath when He listed it with the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. Thus it is an important aspect of God’s law, which we are to obey. (See the chapter titled “God’s Law and Sin,” beginning on page 16.)

In Exodus 20:8-10, God said that man is to “*remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.*” We remember and hallow the Sabbath by refraining from work during that time and instead using it to seek after God and worship Him.

Leviticus 23:3 lists the seventh-day Sabbath as one of God’s appointed times and declares it a period of solemn rest and of holy convocation—a mandated sacred assembly. (See the chapter titled “The Festivals of God,” beginning on page 34.) As Christians follow this pattern of observance and worship, they are reminded of the Creator God, the One who brought them into being.

In Deuteronomy 5:12-15 God reemphasizes the need to keep the Sabbath. He explains that the Sabbath is to be a reminder not only of Him as the Creator, but of the fact that He is the One who frees from bondage (see also Luke 4:18-19). Ancient Israel remembered being freed from physical bondage in Egypt. Christians remember being freed from spiritual bondage and liberated through Jesus Christ (Romans 6:16-18).

Exodus 31:13-17 points out that the Sabbath is a sign between God and His people and constitutes a perpetual covenant. This is in addition to the instruction given at the time of man’s creation and in the Ten Commandments. The Sabbath is to be kept holy as a reminder to those called of God that He is the one true God who sets them apart and that they are His children who have surrendered their lives in obedience to Him.

When Jesus returns to the earth and establishes the rule of the Kingdom of God over all nations, the Sabbath will be regularly observed by all humankind as a means of worshipping and serving Him (Isaiah 66:23).

Jesus Himself set a righteous example in His life of observing the Sabbath (Luke 4:31), and the New Testament records that His followers continued that practice long after His death and resurrection.

Paul taught the gentiles (non-Israelites) on the Sabbath (Acts 13:42-44), following both the law of God and the example of Christ. Wherever Paul went he taught on the Sabbath, as was his custom, and established churches that kept the Sabbath (Acts 17:2; 18:4). No example can be found in the writings of the apostles or the practice of the New Testament Church that shows any hint of change in the example and teaching they received from Christ.

Hebrews 4:9 declares that “there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God” (NASB). The context of this passage, Hebrews 3-4, presents the seventh-day Sabbath as symbolic of the rest that the ancient Israelites sought—fulfilled in part in their settlement in the Promised Land, but to be ultimately fulfilled in the future rule of God over all nations, when all peoples will find true rest. Nearby verses show that Christians now are to be diligent to enter God’s future rest as well as the weekly rest that prefigures it (Hebrews 4:4, 9-11).

In conclusion, the Sabbath looks back to creation and reminds man of his Creator. In the present, it recalls for those who keep the seventh day holy that God is the One who has delivered them from the bondage of sin. Finally, the Sabbath looks forward to the return of Jesus Christ and the establishment of the Kingdom of God, when there will be true rest for all humanity.

(For more details, download or request *Sunset to Sunset: God’s Sabbath Rest.*)

## The Passover

*We believe in observing the New Testament Passover on the night of the 14th of Abib, the anniversary of the death of our Savior (Leviticus 23:5; Luke 22:13-14).*

Passover is the first of God’s seven annual festivals listed in Leviticus 23, immediately followed by the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread. (See the chapter titled “The Festivals of God,” beginning on page 34.) As the New Testament instructs, we are to observe the Passover in commemoration of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Revealed to the Israelites at the time of their deliverance from Egypt, as recorded in Exodus 12-13, Passover observance involved each household sacrificing an unblemished lamb on the 14th day of the first month of the Hebrew calendar (Abib or Nisan) and eating it with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. In addition to the meat, herbs and unleavened bread, the Passover also came to traditionally include wine.

The lamb’s blood, placed at that time around the Israelites’ doorways, enabled the people to be “passed over” (spared) when God in just judgment slew the firstborn of Egypt. The lives of the Israelite firstborn were thus



redeemed (bought back or ransomed) by the blood of the lamb.

In observing the Passover every year afterward on the same date, the Israelites were to recall this redemption in Egypt (while the Feast of Unleavened Bread that followed memorialized their deliverance from Egyptian slavery in the Exodus).

Yet besides recalling their past redemption, the Old Testament Passover prefigured a much greater redemption—by a much greater sacrifice. “For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us” (1 Corinthians 5:7). Jesus Christ is referred to as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). We are “redeemed . . . with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot” (1 Peter 1:18-19). (See the chapter titled “The Sacrifice of Jesus Christ,” beginning on page 20.)

Jesus’ death occurred on the afternoon of the 14th of Abib, the date of the Passover. We know this because it was the preparation day for the annual Sabbath that followed on the 15th, the first day of the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread (Matthew 27:62; Mark 15:42; Luke 23:54; John 19:14, 31, 42). (See the chapter titled “Three Days and Three Nights,” beginning on page 22.)

Moreover, on the night before His death, Jesus observed a memorial ceremony with His disciples that He specifically identified as the Passover (Matthew 26:17-30; Mark 14:12-26; Luke 22:7-20). This was the beginning of the 14th of Abib, as biblical days are reckoned from sunset to sunset. (For more on the biblical reckoning of days, see the chapter titled “The Sabbath Day,” beginning on page 29.)

Jesus commanded that from then on the Passover was to be observed by His followers *in remembrance of Him*, and He declared that the symbols of unleavened bread and wine were to be considered as representative of His body and His blood given in sacrifice. Jesus said of the wine, “This is My blood of the new covenant” (Matthew 26:28; Mark 14:24), instituting a New Covenant observance for Christians today—consistent with His role as “the Mediator of the new covenant” (Hebrews 12:24).

Jesus also said His blood was “poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matthew 26:28), revealing that His sacrificial death would pay for sin’s penalty of death (Romans 6:23; see Hebrews 9:15).

But the New Testament Passover is not just about the death of Jesus as the Lamb of God. It is also about His suffering (Luke 22:15). We are to remember the entire sacrifice He made—both His suffering and His death. His suffering, death and burial all occurred on the 14th of Abib. The symbols of the unleavened bread and the wine represent His total sacrifice—again, His suffering *and* His death.

Jesus’ death occurred, as mentioned, on the afternoon of the 14th of Abib, but His period of intense suffering began the night before His death while He

was still with His disciples: “And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and He began to be sorrowful and deeply distressed. Then He said to them, ‘My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death’” (Matthew 26:37-38).

In His sacrifice, Jesus took on Himself the penalty for all mankind’s sins (1 Peter 3:18). When we partake of the bread and wine, we recognize that He offered His body and blood to cover our sins. Through faith in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ we are reconciled to God the Father.

Reconciliation grants us access to the Father, making it possible for us to come boldly before His throne of grace to find help in time of need (Hebrews 4:16). It is because of Christ’s sacrifice that we can be healed spiritually, physically, mentally and emotionally (Isaiah 53:4-5; James 5:14). (Again, see the chapter titled “The Sacrifice of Jesus Christ,” beginning on page 20.)

When we eat the unleavened bread at Passover, we symbolize partaking of the benefit of Christ’s sacrifice as well as Christ living in us (John 6:53-54). We also show our unity with Christ and with each member of the Body of Christ, the Church (1 Corinthians 10:16), as well as our willingness to live by the Word of God.

Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 11:20-26 that by this ceremony “we proclaim the Lord’s death till He comes”—representing the only way mankind can be reconciled to God. In fact, Passover ultimately looks forward to the future. While Christ’s sacrifice was the fulfillment of the slaying of the lamb, He said that the Passover would be “fulfilled in the kingdom of God” (Luke 22:15-16). That is when the process of redemption will be complete.

Furthermore, Christ’s presentation of wine as symbolic of His blood of the New Covenant was, in further symbolism, a type of wedding proposal to His people—looking forward to the “marriage of the Lamb,” which will follow His return (Revelation 19:7, 9). (See the chapter titled “The Church,” beginning on page 49.)

As for observing the Passover today, Paul said in the same passage in 1 Corinthians 11 that the Church is to “come together” to “eat this bread and drink this cup.” And he confirmed here that we are to observe this memorial when Jesus did with His disciples, “*on the same night in which He was betrayed*” (verse 23)—the beginning of the 14th of Abib.

The annual service is to also include the ordinance of foot-washing, as established by Jesus at the same Passover observance. After setting an example of being a servant by washing His disciples’ feet, He stated: “You also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you . . . If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them” (John 13:14-17).

All three elements—the foot-washing, the unleavened bread and the

wine—are to be part of the annual observance of the Passover. It should be observed only once a year after sunset at the beginning of the 14th day of the first month of the Hebrew calendar, as established by the Word of God.

This observance is so important in God's sight that He gave a provision in Numbers 9:1-14 that if a person is prevented by unavoidable circumstances from keeping the Passover on the 14th day of the first month, he may observe it one month later on the 14th day of the second month. The United Church of God continues this practice today.

Finally, it should be stated that Passover represents an important step in God's plan of salvation. For while Christ's sacrificial death, as memorialized in the Passover, reconciles us to God, we are actually *saved* by Christ's life (Romans 5:9-10). As described in the next chapter, this deliverance is portrayed in the Feast of Unleavened Bread and the other festivals of God that follow.

(For more details, download or request *God's Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind*.)

## The Festivals of God

*We believe in the commanded observance of the seven annual festivals that were given to ancient Israel by God; were kept by Jesus Christ, the apostles and the New Testament Church; and will be observed by all mankind during Christ's millennial reign. These festivals reveal God's plan of salvation (Colossians 2:16-17; 1 Peter 1:19-20; 1 Corinthians 5:8; 15:22-26; 16:8; James 1:18; Exodus 23:14-17; Leviticus 23; Luke 2:41-42; 22:14-15; John 7:2, 8, 10, 14; Acts 2:1; 18:21; 20:16; Zechariah 14:16-21).*

**W**e celebrate the festival days God has commanded us to observe in Scripture, rejecting all man-made holidays derived from pagan worship, such as Christmas and Easter, in accordance with Deuteronomy 12:29-32.

When God delivered the nation of Israel from captivity in Egypt, He commanded the nation to participate in periods of special worship during the harvest seasons of the year (Exodus 23:14-16; Deuteronomy 16:1-17). These are listed in full in Leviticus 23, where they are referred to in a number of Bible translations as “the feasts of the LORD” (verses 2-4).

“Feast” is used here in the sense of festival or celebration. That is certainly a valid description, and four of the listed occasions are actually named in the original Hebrew Old Testament with the word *chag* or *hag*, meaning “festival.” But the Hebrew word used up front in verses 2-4 for all the occasions is *mo'edim*, meaning “appointed times.” Thus, these occasions are special appointments God has made with His people—appointments He wants us to keep.

Understanding of the gospel message and God's plan of salvation is enriched by realizing that God uses the physical harvests of food crops to symbolize the spiritual harvests of human beings through God's gift of salvation by Jesus Christ (Matthew 9:37-38; John 4:35; 15:1-8; Colossians 2:16-17). The first three festivals are associated with the spring harvests in the land of Israel, while the last four festivals are related to the harvest of late summer and fall.

Within the seven festivals are seven annual Holy Days or annual Sabbaths. These, along with God's *weekly* Sabbath, are holy convocations, or commanded assemblies, of God's people. They are holy because they are sanctified—set apart—by God. He commands His people to assemble on these days for worship and to learn about Him and His plan, as well as for fellowshiping and rejoicing together (Leviticus 23:1-4; Deuteronomy 14:23-26; Nehemiah 8:1-12).

The New Testament record shows that the first-century Christian Church continued to observe these biblical festivals. Jesus Christ Himself observed these festivals, and we as His followers are told to walk as He walked (John 7:8-14; 1 John 2:6)—to live as He lived.

The New Testament Church miraculously began on one of these annual festivals—the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4). The apostles and disciples of the early Church continued to observe these festivals long after Jesus' death and resurrection (Acts 18:21; 20:16; 27:9; 1 Corinthians 5:8).

Paul upheld their observance and presented them as continuing “shadows” or outlines of the great events in God's plan of salvation that are yet to be fulfilled (Colossians 2:16-17). He also instructed the gentile (non-Israelite) congregation in Corinth regarding one of the festivals, “*Let us keep the feast*” (1 Corinthians 5:8).

Through the observance of these feasts, God's people focus on and are reminded throughout the year of the work of Jesus the Messiah in fulfilling God's plan of salvation. His work involves different phases—first coming to offer Himself as the sin sacrifice for humanity, now serving as Advocate and High Priest for His people and living within them to help them overcome sin, and ultimately returning in power and glory to establish the reign of the Kingdom of God over all nations.

All of this and more is pictured in the annual festivals. Through Christ

as our focal point, we begin to understand the special meaning behind the annual feasts.

The plan of salvation as revealed in the Holy Scriptures is pictured in the meaning of these seven annual festivals listed in Leviticus 23. In brief:

- **The Passover**, in early spring in the northern hemisphere, teaches us that Jesus Christ was sinless and, as the sacrificial “Lamb of God,” gave His life so that the sins of humanity could be forgiven and the death penalty removed (1 Corinthians 5:7; 1 Peter 1:18-20; Romans 3:25).

Passover, although not observed as an annual Sabbath on which no customary work is to be done, is the first festival of the year. Its observance includes foot-washing and the partaking of unleavened bread and wine as symbolic of Christ’s body and shed blood offered in sacrifice. (See the chapter titled “The Passover,” beginning on page 31.)

- **The Feast of Unleavened Bread**, starting the day after Passover and continuing for seven days, teaches us that Jesus Christ leads us to reject lawlessness, repent of sin and live by every word of God (1 Corinthians 5:8; Matthew 4:4).

During this festival, leaven—an agent such as yeast that causes bread dough to rise during baking—symbolizes sin and is therefore removed from our homes and not eaten for the seven days (1 Corinthians 5:7-8; Exodus 12:19). By eating *unleavened* bread during this time instead, we picture living a life of sincerity and truth, free from sin. The first and last days of this seven-day festival are annual Sabbaths.

- **The Feast of Pentecost** is an annual Sabbath in late spring in the northern hemisphere. Also called the Feast of Weeks or the Feast of Harvest or Firstfruits, it teaches us that Jesus Christ is now building His Church, comprising those who are a “kind of firstfruits” in the spiritual harvest of mankind, having the “firstfruits of the Spirit” (Exodus 23:16; Acts 2:1-4, 37-39; James 1:18; Romans 8:23). (See the chapter titled “The Church,” beginning on page 49.)

These will be given salvation at the return of Christ. They have been empowered with the Holy Spirit, which creates in each one a new heart and nature to live in wholehearted obedience to the commandments of God. Jesus Himself is the first of the firstfruits, as formerly pictured in a special firstfruits offering during the previous festival (see Leviticus 23:9-14; 1 Corinthians 15:20, 23). Pentecost, Greek for “fiftieth,” is the 50th day counting from that initial offering.

- **The Feast of Trumpets**, an annual Sabbath in late summer or early fall in the northern hemisphere, teaches us that Jesus Christ will visibly return to the earth at the end of this age. At that time He will resurrect God’s faithful servants who are no longer living and instantly change those obedient saints who are still alive into immortal spirit beings (Matthew

24:31; 1 Corinthians 15:52-53; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17).

This festival commemorates the blowing of the trumpets that will precede and herald His return. Seven angels with seven trumpets are described in Revelation 8-10 heralding world-shaking events. Christ will return with the blowing of the seventh trumpet (Revelation 11:15).

- **The Day of Atonement**, an annual Sabbath following shortly after the previous one, points to the time when Satan the devil will be bound for 1,000 years (Leviticus 16:29-30, 20-22; Revelation 20:1-3). It pictures the removal of the primary cause of sin—Satan and his demons. Until God removes the original instigator of sin, mankind will continue to be led into disobedience and suffering.

This Holy Day also pictures our High Priest, Jesus Christ, making atonement for the sins of all mankind. This act of atonement—“at-one-ment”—allows us to be reconciled (at one) with God and have direct access to Him by spiritually entering into the “holiest of all” (Hebrews 9:8-14; 10:19-20). By fasting on this day, we draw closer to God and picture the reconciliation to God that all mankind will experience following Christ’s return. Christ is essential in this process as our High Priest (Hebrews 4:14-15; 5:4-5, 10) and as our one sacrifice for sin forever (Hebrews 9:26-28; 10:12).

- **The Feast of Tabernacles**, also called the Feast of Ingathering, comes a few days after the previous Holy Day and lasts for seven days, the first being an annual Sabbath. This festival teaches us that when Jesus Christ returns, He will begin the ingathering or harvest of the greater part of mankind and establish a new society with Himself as King of Kings and Lord of Lords under God the Father.

Christ, assisted by the resurrected saints, will set up His government on the earth for 1,000 years (Revelation 19:11-16; 20:4; Leviticus 23:39-43; Matthew 17:1-4; Hebrews 11:8-9). Rule under His laws will spread from Jerusalem throughout the world to usher in an unprecedented period of peace and prosperity (Isaiah 2:2-4; Daniel 2:35, 44; 7:13-14). (See the chapter titled “Jesus Christ’s Return and Coming Reign,” beginning on page 60.)

This festival is observed today through regional gatherings throughout the world, with Church members living in temporary dwellings for the entire period, in line with the Bible’s instructions.

- **The Eighth Day**, the annual Sabbath immediately following the Feast of Tabernacles, is known to many as the Last Great Day. This day teaches us that Jesus Christ will complete His harvest of human beings by raising from the dead, and offering salvation to, all who have died in the past and have never been given a full opportunity to be saved (Ezekiel 37:1-14; Romans 11:25-27; Luke 11:31-32; Revelation 20:11-13). (See the chapter titled “The Resurrections and Eternal Judgment,” beginning on page 57.)

Thus, the annual cycle of the celebration of the festivals and Holy Days

reminds Christ's disciples that He is working out God's plan of offering salvation from sin and death and the gift of eternal life in the family of God to all humanity—past, present and future.

(For more details, download or request *Holidays or Holy Days: Does It Matter Which Days We Observe?* and *God's Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind*.)

## God's Food Laws

*We believe that those meats that are designated "unclean" by God in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 are not to be eaten.*

Scripture reveals that God created the vast array of animal life that inhabits our planet and further states that some animals were created for the specific purpose of providing food for mankind (1 Timothy 4:3). Although a Christian is not obligated to eat any meats, vegetarianism in its various forms, if practiced as a matter of religious requirement, is considered to be a spiritual weakness (Romans 14:2), and trying to impose that as a teaching to others is listed as a "doctrine of demons" (1 Timothy 4:1-3).

There is no clear statement as to when God first revealed the difference between those animals that are designated "clean" in Scripture and those that are not. The absence of a clear command on this matter in the first few chapters of Genesis should not be taken as proof that no instruction was given in this regard at the beginning of human history.

There are few clear commands in the early pages of the Bible, but the examples that are recorded reveal that standards of right and wrong were clearly understood. For example, there is no clear command against murder before Cain killed his brother Abel, but no one would conclude that murder was therefore acceptable before this point.

The book of Genesis can be described as a book of beginnings. It was written or compiled by Moses to provide a historical record of what took place, not to list specific laws. Readers shouldn't assume, based on absence from the beginning of Genesis, that any law not mentioned was not in existence from the beginning.

The first statement in Scripture concerning "clean" and "unclean" animals is found in Genesis 7:2, where Noah is commanded to take seven (or, more likely, seven *pairs*) of each kind of clean animal and only one

pair of each kind of unclean animal.

When God told Noah to build a giant ark, He gave explicit instructions on its size, composition and design, yet Scripture records that God saw no need to instruct Noah about which creatures were clean and which were unclean. God's instruction and Noah's response clearly indicate that Noah already understood which creatures were clean and which were not.

At the conclusion of the great Flood, God told Noah: "Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. I have given you all things, even as the green herbs" (Genesis 9:3). This did not mean, however, that every single animal was fit for human consumption. Many creatures by their very nature are dangerous, poisonous and place our health at risk.

The point being made here was that, even though there were few men left alive, and large and dangerous animals had been preserved, Noah and his family had no need to fear these animals. Animals, the verse makes clear, were to be for man's benefit. As a whole, they were given into man's control *in the same way the green plants were given*.

Note the parallel. Some green plants are suitable for food, some are suitable for building materials, some are for beautification and enjoyment, and some are poisonous and can sicken and bring death when ingested. In the same way, some animals are useful for providing food while others provide fibers for clothing, strength for working the land or protection from dangers. And like poisonous plants, some animals are not intended to be eaten.

Whenever animals are mentioned in Scripture as a food source or in connection with sacrifice before Israel received the Old Covenant at Mount Sinai, they are invariably animals designated as clean (Genesis 15:9—cow, goat, sheep, dove, pigeon; Genesis 22:13—sheep; Exodus 12:5—sheep or goat). The law of clean and unclean meats clearly predates the Old Covenant, regardless of what role they may have played within that covenant.

When the Levitical system was established, it was necessary to codify a number of matters that had already been in effect for some time. Two sections of Scripture, Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14:3-21, codify which creatures are set apart as suitable for food and which are not. The term used to designate those animals whose flesh is acceptable for food is *clean*, while the term used for those that are not suitable for food is *unclean*. It is important that we "distinguish between the unclean and the clean" (Leviticus 11:47; compare Ezekiel 22:26; 44:23).

Scripture does not reveal exactly why God designated certain animal flesh as suitable for food while other flesh is not acceptable. There could be health reasons or symbolic reasons or, as there seems to be, both. God certainly knows why and how He created each animal. Yet even if God's determinations in this matter were purely just a test of obedience, He, as the Creator of all life, has full rights to make such decisions.



Various passages in the New Testament show that the laws of clean and unclean meats were still being observed by Jesus Christ and His followers. As eager as the religious leaders of Jesus' day were to accuse Him of violating their interpretations of religious law, there is no record that they ever confronted Him about His teachings or practices on this matter. Had He advocated eating unclean meats, it would have been an ideal way to besmirch His reputation with the masses, since they would have been appalled at such an idea.

Jesus' statement in an oft-misquoted passage in Mark 7:19 would have outraged the religious leaders had they interpreted it the way many people do today. His reference to purifying all foods here is often thought to refer to Him declaring all meat clean. But His statement actually refers to all foods being purged out of the body through bodily elimination. This has nothing to do with whether meats are considered clean or unclean.

Acts 10 is another commonly misunderstood passage that actually powerfully illustrates the early New Testament Church's understanding about clean and unclean meats—although this is not the primary purpose behind the vision described here.

The apostle Peter received a vision from God that instructed him to take the gospel message to gentiles (non-Israelites). During this vision, Peter three times refused to partake of the unclean animals shown him and remained puzzled about the meaning of the vision until God revealed that it was actually about people and not really about clean and unclean animals. It was revealed to Peter that *no human being* should be considered “common or unclean” (verses 28-29).

This chapter ends with the Holy Spirit being given to the household of the gentile Cornelius as proof that God's calling to repentance and salvation was now going to people in all nations (verses 44-48; see also Acts 11:1-18). Although this section of Scripture has been used to claim permission to eat unclean animals, it clearly indicates the opposite. The event here took place several years into the history of the New Testament Church, yet Peter rejected the idea of eating unclean meat, even going so far as protesting that he had “*never eaten anything that is common or unclean*” (verse 14).

Paul, in a passage cited earlier, wrote of creatures “which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth” and described these creatures as “sanctified by the word of God and prayer” (1 Timothy 4:3, 5).

The word used to describe these creatures, *sanctified*, means “set apart,” and it carries the dual connotation of being set apart *from* something as well as *for* something. The only animals set apart by the Word of God, the Bible, are those listed in it as clean. They have been set apart *from* all other animals and *for* man's nourishment. The flesh of those creatures designated

as suitable for food is to be received thankfully by those who believe and know the truth. Animal flesh designated as unclean is unfit for human consumption and should not be eaten.

God gave other important food laws as well. He declares as a perpetual statute that His people eat neither fat nor blood (Leviticus 3:17; 7:22-26; 17:10-14; 19:26; Deuteronomy 12:16, 23-25; 15:23; 1 Samuel 14:33-34; Ezekiel 33:25). The forbidden fat referred to is that of mammals, not birds, and it is the covering fat that could be removed rather than the fat marbled in the meat.

The blood restriction applies to mammals *and* birds. The requirement that blood be drained from any meat before eating it was even communicated by the New Testament apostles to gentile converts accustomed formerly to eating strangled animals not drained of blood (Acts 15:19-20, 28-29). As God says in Deuteronomy 12:25, “You shall not eat it, that it may go well with you and your children after you, when you do what is right in the sight of the LORD.”

(For more details, download or request *What Does the Bible Teach About Clean and Unclean Meats?*)

## Military Service and War

*We believe that Christians are forbidden by the commandments of God from taking human life directly or indirectly and that bearing arms is contrary to this fundamental belief. Therefore, we believe that Christians should not voluntarily become engaged in military service. If they are involuntarily engaged in military service, we believe they should refuse conscientiously to bear arms and, to the extent possible, refuse to come under military authority (Exodus 20:13; Matthew 5:21-22; 1 Corinthians 7:21-23; Acts 5:29).*

The way of God is the way of love, sacrifice and sharing (Romans 12:1, 10). The teaching of God for an individual regarding the taking of human life is summed up in the Sixth Commandment, which says, “You shall not murder” (Exodus 20:13). Jesus Christ repeated a great principle when He said, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39). And the apostle Paul said, “Love does no harm to a neighbor” (Romans 13:10). (See the chapter titled “God's Law and Sin,” beginning on page 16).

Jesus stated, “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of

this world, My servants would fight . . .” (John 18:36). In the Old Testament period, Israel was a kingdom of this world yet with God as King. It exercised civil authority at God’s command—including the power of earthly warfare. That time and situation has ended.

The Church of God today is a spiritual nation—spiritual Israel. (See the chapter titled “The Church,” beginning on page 49.) As Christians, we have come out of darkness, from the power of Satan to the power of the Kingdom of God (Acts 26:18; Colossians 1:11-13).

That Kingdom is not found in any national governments today. Rather, we now have our citizenship in heaven (Philippians 3:20), being ambassadors of a kingdom that is yet to be established throughout this earth. Therefore we do not fight in earthly warfare.

Consider that if Christians had the responsibility of taking up arms for their respective countries, then a war between these countries would have Christians fighting other Christians—an obviously untenable circumstance, as Christ’s disciples are to be characterized by their love for one another (John 13:34-35). And that, as already pointed out, means doing no harm (Romans 13:10).

We are to emulate the actions of Jesus (1 Peter 4:1, 13-16). He did not respond in kind when He was reviled, and He did not threaten when He suffered. He suffered for doing good and endured it patiently because of His desire to please God (1 Peter 2:19-24). He taught that to be angry with our brother can result in sin (Matthew 5:21-22). We are to love even our enemies and do good to those who hate us (verses 43-44). We are not to avenge ourselves; vengeance belongs to God (Romans 12:19).

Our warfare as Christians is in the spiritual arena (Ephesians 6:10-20). We do not war against flesh (2 Corinthians 10:3) but against wicked spirits in high places (Ephesians 6:12). We are to be faithful spiritual soldiers of Jesus Christ (2 Timothy 2:3-4). This is our calling in life. As such, a Christian must at times face a conflict between man’s laws and the laws of Almighty God. When that happens, the Christian must obey the laws of God, which always take precedence (Acts 5:29; 1 Peter 2:13-14).

In fact, we should try to avoid conflicts if we can (Romans 12:18), and joining the military is not conducive to that. In most countries, the military has its own rules and regulations. A person in the military is not free to decide what he or she can do, but is under the authority of superiors and must do what they say or risk severe consequences.

The wisest course of action is to refrain from putting oneself in such a position, since a person in the military is subject to its authority and may be called upon to take human life or violate other areas or principles of God’s law. Paul tells us not to become slaves of men (1 Corinthians 7:23).

Therefore, the United Church of God, an International Association, supports the conscientious objection of its members to military service and war.

## Promises to Abraham

*We believe in God’s enduring righteousness. That righteousness is demonstrated by God’s faithfulness in fulfilling all the promises He made to the father of the faithful, Abraham. As promised, God multiplied Abraham’s lineal descendants so that Abraham literally became the “father” of many nations. We believe that God, as promised, materially prospered Abraham’s lineal descendants Isaac and Jacob (whose name He later changed to Israel). We believe that God, through Abraham’s Seed, Jesus Christ, is making salvation available to all humanity regardless of physical lineage. Salvation is not, therefore, a right of birth. It is freely open to all whom God calls, and those who are regarded as descendants of Abraham are those of the faith, heirs according to the promises. We believe that the knowledge that God has fulfilled and continues to fulfill the physical promises made to Abraham and his children, and that He is fulfilling the spiritual promise through Jesus Christ, is critical to understanding the message of the prophets and its application to the world (Psalm 111:1-10; Romans 4:16; 9:7-8; Galatians 3:16; Genesis 32:28).*

God made physical and spiritual promises to Abraham. The physical promises involved physical greatness for his descendants: “I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great” (Genesis 12:1-2). These physical, national promises contained assurances of land and other blessings (Genesis 12:7; 13:14-17; 15:18).

These physical promises were formally passed on to Abraham’s descendants. First they were passed on to Isaac (Genesis 26:1-4). Next they went to Jacob (Genesis 28:3-4, 13-14), whom God renamed Israel, telling him that “a nation and a company of nations” would proceed from him (Genesis 35:9-12). Then they were passed on to Joseph and finally to Joseph’s two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, who were to become, respectively, “a multitude of nations” and “a great people” (Genesis 48:15-19, New Living Translation). But because of the enslavement of Israel and later disobedience, the fulfillment of these physical promises was delayed.

Before any of Abraham’s early descendants inherited the land of promise, they became slaves in Egypt (Exodus 1:7-11). Israel groaned because of its bondage, and God heard. In His faithfulness, God determined to deliver Israel from bondage to keep His promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that Abraham’s descendants would be physically blessed by becoming a great

people on the earth (Exodus 2:23-25; 6:7-8; 13:5; Deuteronomy 9:4-6).

Next we find promises of physical blessings being offered to the nation of Israel after coming out of Egypt. Only if the Israelites would obey God and remain faithful to His covenant with them would they receive these blessings. If they would not obey the covenant's terms, the blessings would be withheld and curses would come in their place (Exodus 19:5-6; Leviticus 26:3-39; Deuteronomy 28:1-68).

Because of the flagrant sins of Israel and Judah—the nation of Israel having been split into these two kingdoms—the national blessings were still withheld. There were only brief periods of greatness under a few righteous kings. But, because of God's faithfulness, He eventually would bless Abraham's descendants with the greatness He foretold.

Part of the punishment for Israel's sins was sending them into national captivity. Many Jews of the southern kingdom of Judah, though deported to Babylon, later returned to the land of Judea. However, the Israelites of the northern kingdom of Israel who were deported to Assyria did not return to resettle in their former homeland. They became what are now known as the "lost 10 tribes" of Israel. Over the course of time these people migrated to northwestern Europe.

The descendants of Ephraim and Manasseh have received the blessing of ascendance to national greatness. Ephraim has become the promised company of nations (Great Britain and the Commonwealth peoples of British ancestry, such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand), and Manasseh has become a great nation (the United States of America). It is through these people that the prophecies of the Bible concerning Israel are being primarily fulfilled (Genesis 48:16; 49:22-26).

However, the tribes of Israel today also exist in other nations of or emergent from northwestern Europe. The Jewish people today are descendants of the people of the ancient kingdom of Judah—meaning that while Jews are Israelites, not all Israelites are Jews.

God intended Israel to be a model nation in obedience to Him for other peoples to see and want to emulate (Deuteronomy 4:5-8). He gave the people His laws and covenant, but they did not have a proper heart to continue in obedience (Deuteronomy 5:29), and thus they failed in their example, leading to national punishment.

Severe judgment will come yet again in "the time of Jacob's trouble" (Jeremiah 30:7) when, shortly before Christ's return, many end-time prophecies regarding the modern-day descendants of Israel will be fulfilled. (See the chapter titled "Jesus Christ's Return and Coming Reign," beginning on page 60.) A major lesson of Israel is that a people given so much will still not truly succeed unless given what is needed most—the means for a true spiritual transformation of character.

Also contained in the promises to Abraham was the more important spiritual promise of salvation to all men who would become Abraham's "seed" (his descendants). Through Abraham all families of the earth were to have access to God's blessings (Genesis 12:3). God confirmed the promises to Abraham because he obeyed God's commandments (Genesis 22:18; 26:5).

The apostle Paul understood that salvation was not just for Jews or Israelites, but for all humanity. He explained that the "Seed" to whom the promises applied was Jesus Christ, and that all must become one in Him (Galatians 3:8, 14-16, 26-29).

The priest Zacharias, at the birth of his son John the Baptist, prophesied that God would remember the oath He had sworn to Abraham (Luke 1:69-72). Paul records that Jesus Christ came to confirm the promises made to the fathers (Romans 15:8). The promise of salvation comes from God through the Holy Spirit as a part of the New Covenant made available to us through Christ's death and resurrection.

The Holy Spirit is the key to the "better promises" that come under the "new" and "better" covenant that was established on those better promises (Hebrews 8:6). It would make obedience possible, so that Israel and all others joined to Israel through it would be able to succeed in being the model nation God intended.

The apostles were told to wait at Jerusalem for this better promise (Acts 1:4, 8). They waited to receive the seal of the Holy Spirit "of promise," which was the guarantee of their inheritance (Ephesians 1:13-14). It is by God's Spirit that we can know that we are the children of God and in Christ (Romans 8:9, 14-17) and thus Abraham's seed (spiritually) and heirs of salvation according to the promise (Galatians 3:28).

This promise is not based on race, but on God's calling and on individual repentance, regardless of race or national origin. By this means, through faith, all can be renamed "the Israel of God" (Galatians 6:16). (See the chapter titled "The Church," beginning on page 49.)

When Jesus Christ establishes His New Covenant with Israel and Judah at His return (Jeremiah 31:31)—the covenant in which the Church of God is now a forerunner—then the physical nation of Israel will at last be able to serve as the model nation God intended it to be (Zechariah 8:23; Jeremiah 31:1; Romans 11:12)—having been transformed into spiritual Israel and leading the whole world into the same saving relationship with God.

*(For more details, download or request [The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy](#) and [The New Covenant: Does It Abolish God's Law?](#))*

## God's Purpose for Mankind

*We believe God's purpose for mankind is to prepare those whom He calls—and who elect through a life of overcoming sin, developing righteous character and growing in grace and knowledge—to possess God's Kingdom and become kings and priests reigning with Christ at His return. We believe that the reason for mankind's existence is literally to be born as spirit beings into the family of God (Romans 6:15-16; 8:14-17, 30; Acts 2:39; 2 Peter 3:18; Revelation 3:5; 5:10).*

The purpose for man's existence is stated at both ends of Scripture. At the beginning, God reveals that He created man in His own image and likeness (Genesis 1:26-27)—language that refers to offspring or children (Genesis 5:1-3)—to, in submission to Him, share dominion or rule with Him over creation (Genesis 1:28). (See the chapter titled “Humanity,” beginning on page 12.)

And at the end of the Bible God says, “He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be My son” (Revelation 21:7). Again, the wording concerns shared rule with God over all creation in submission to Him as His children.

Thus we see that man's destiny is to be part of the Kingdom and family of God. And in the latter verse here, as throughout the Bible, we are told that man can only reach this destiny through a process of overcoming.

It is God's desire that no human beings perish but that all come to repentance so as to become members of His family as sons and daughters in His Kingdom (2 Peter 3:9; 2 Corinthians 6:18). As part of this process, God is now calling some individuals to inherit eternal life at the return of Jesus Christ to the earth (1 Corinthians 1:26-28; Matthew 20:16; John 6:44, 65), with others to be called later. (See the chapters titled “The Festivals of God,” “The Church” and “The Resurrections and Eternal Judgment,” beginning on pages 34, 49 and 57.)

Those being chosen now must accept Christ as their Savior, surrender their wills to God's will and strive with God's help to overcome sin during their present lifetime (Revelation 3:21).

Jesus Christ is referred to as “the firstborn among many brethren” (Romans 8:29; see also verses 14-17; Revelation 1:5-6; Colossians 1:15-18). He came as a human being to lead the way for others to be glorified and inherit all things. Christians are actually referred to as “heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ” (Romans 8:17). Yet as Hebrews 1 through 2 explains,

mankind has not yet achieved its destiny of inheriting all things, but Jesus has, and God is in the process of “bringing many sons to glory” (Hebrews 2:10).

In this process, people become God's children through receiving His Holy Spirit, which joins with each individual's human spirit (Romans 8:16). We are thereby “begotten again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible” (1 Peter 1:23, American Standard Version).

And we become “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4)—just as any child takes on the genetic traits of its parents. Through a development process, we become more and more like God in terms of character, while we are aimed toward an ultimate transformation involving our very essence and level of existence.

The apostle Paul explained that “as we have borne the image of the man of dust [the first man Adam], we shall also bear the image of the heavenly Man [Jesus Christ]” (1 Corinthians 15:49). And while the first man Adam became a living, physical being, “the last Adam [Christ] became a life-giving spirit” (verse 45). So we will be spirit beings like Christ. Indeed, “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God” (verse 50).

The apostle John makes an amazing statement about our future resurrection at Christ's return: “Brethren, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, *we shall be like Him*, for we shall see Him as He is” (1 John 3:2).

And Paul further explains that “we eagerly await . . . the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so they will be like his glorious body” (Philippians 3:20-21, NIV). That is, Christ's divine spirit body is the same kind of body we will have in the resurrection!

Just as human children are the same kind of beings as their parents and older siblings, *human* beings, so will we be the same kind of beings as God the Father and Jesus Christ—*divine* beings. By saying that it's not yet revealed what we shall be, John meant that we cannot now truly grasp what it means to be like the Father and Christ, as it's beyond the capacity of our limited human minds. He nevertheless understood that we will be what They are.

In fact, God was even more explicit about our destiny in Psalm 82:6, stating His intention for people as, “You are gods, and all of you are children of the Most High.” Jesus actually quoted from this verse (see John 10:30-36). The truth is that our destiny is to bear the name of the God family (Ephesians 3:14-15). Presently, the one God—that is, the one God family—consists of two divine beings: God the Father and Jesus Christ. But ultimately, God intends to expand this divine family into billions. (See the chapter titled “God the Father, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit,” beginning on page 4.)

The Church of God of this age is a forerunner in fulfilling this purpose.



At the time of Christ's return, those who have died in the faith will be resurrected, and those who are alive in the faith will be changed.

Those in both groups will become divine, immortal spirit beings in the family of God. They will then serve with Christ on the earth as kings and priests during His millennial, or 1,000-year, rule that will immediately follow (Revelation 5:10; 20:4). (See the chapters titled "The Resurrections and Eternal Judgment" and "Jesus Christ's Return and Coming Reign," beginning on pages 57 and 60.)

*King* and *priest* are both offices held by Jesus Christ. He is *King of Kings* and *Lord of Lords* (Revelation 19:15-16). He is also our *High Priest* (Hebrews 3:1; 4:14-16; 5:5-6; 6:20; 7:24-28; 8:1-6; 9:11; 10:12). Thus, others will, as just noted, share in His responsibilities as both kings and priests serving under Him to carry out the Father's will.

Those who become *priests* in the Millennium will be responsible for teaching people to discern between "the unclean and the clean," a phrase that in its broadest sense includes discerning between good and evil (see Ezekiel 22:26; 44:23-24). As messengers from God, they will teach the law of God, making known its meaning and application (Malachi 2:7-9).

One of the responsibilities of a *king* in the Old Testament was to write out the words of God's law and "read it all the days of his life" so he would carefully observe it and not turn aside from it (Deuteronomy 17:18-20). Those made kings and priests in the Kingdom of God will be those who have allowed God to write His laws in their hearts and minds while they are still human beings (see Hebrews 8:10-11; Jeremiah 31:33).

As kings during the Millennium, they will teach God's way of life to human beings living in that age (Isaiah 30:20-21). They will administer God's government in those areas in which He gives them responsibilities (see Matthew 19:27-28; Luke 19:11-19). They will even be given authority over angels (1 Corinthians 6:1-3). And in all this, they will be completely subject to Christ's will, just as He is completely subject to the Father's will (John 5:30).

God's great plan encompasses all mankind. The Great White Throne Judgment, described in Revelation 20:11-13, is the period when all human beings who have died without ever understanding that great plan will be resurrected and have their true destiny revealed to them. God's plan is comprehensive. All humanity will enjoy the opportunity to learn His truth and come to repentance. (Again, see the chapters titled "The Festivals of God" and "The Resurrections and Eternal Judgment," beginning on pages 34 and 57.)

This will take place during the time beyond the Millennium when the vast majority of human beings will be raised from the dead to receive their opportunity for salvation. Those who repent and accept Christ as their Savior will receive the gift of everlasting life in the family of God, finally achieving their God-given destiny.

With a transformed new heaven and new earth, the heavenly city of God, the New Jerusalem, will at last come down to the earth with God the Father. And those who have repented and faithfully served Him, then transformed into glorified spirit beings like Himself, will dwell with Him and with Christ forever in perfect peace and happiness—with no more suffering or death (Revelation 21:1-4). (Again, see the chapter titled "Jesus Christ's Return and Coming Reign," beginning on page 60.)

As already mentioned, those who are glorified will inherit from God "all things"—joint ownership and rule over not just the earth but the entire universe and spirit realm. This incredible aspect of man's destiny was foretold early in the Old Testament by Moses when he stated that "the sun, the moon, and the stars, all the host of heaven . . . the LORD your God has given to all the peoples under the whole heaven as a heritage" (Deuteronomy 4:19).

This, then, is the purpose for which humanity was created—to share God's divine level of existence forever as His loving, happy family and to possess with Him and rule over the entire vast created realm. So transcendent is this destiny that we can barely even fathom it!

(For more details, download or request *What Is Your Destiny?*)

## The Church

*We believe that the Church is that body of believers who have received and are being led by the Holy Spirit. The true Church of God is a spiritual organism. Its biblical name is "the Church of God." We believe that the mission of the Church is to preach the gospel (good news) of the coming Kingdom of God to all nations as a witness and to help reconcile to God such people as are now being called. We believe that it is also the mission of the Church of God to strengthen, edify and nurture the children of God in the love and admonition of our Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 2:38-39, 47; 20:28; Romans 8:14; 14:19; Ephesians 1:22-23; 3:14; 4:11-16; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 10:32; 11:16, 22; 12:27; 14:26; 15:9; 2 Corinthians 1:1-2; 5:18-20; Galatians 1:13; 1 Thessalonians 2:14; 2 Thessalonians 1:4; 1 Timothy 3:5, 15; Mark 16:15; Matthew 24:14; 28:18-20; John 6:44, 65; 17:11, 16).*

The New Testament Church of God began on the Day of Pentecost after the ascension of Jesus Christ to heaven. God poured out His Spirit on the disciples who were assembled together on that day in

obedience to Christ's command to remain in Jerusalem (Luke 24:49; Acts 2:1-4; 5:32). Over the next several days, God "added to the church daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47).

The word *church* is used to translate the Greek word *ekklesia*. At the time of the writing of the New Testament, *ekklesia* was a common word for civic gatherings, formed from the noun form of the verb *kaleo* (meaning "to call") and the prefix *ek* (meaning "out of"). From *kaleo* also comes *klesis* ("calling") and *kletos* ("called").

The compound *ek-klesia*, then, means a body of people "called out" to assemble together, just as ancient Israel was called out of Egypt to assemble before God as "the church [*ekklesia*] in the wilderness" (Acts 7:38, King James Version)—or "the congregation in the wilderness" (NKJV). The word *ekklesia* was used in the Greek Septuagint translation of the Old Testament for many instances of the Hebrew *kahal*, usually rendered "assembly" or "congregation" in English Bibles.

In the first New Testament occurrence of *ekklesia*, Jesus during His ministry promised, "I will build My church" (Matthew 16:18) or "I will build my assembly" (Young's Literal Translation). He was referring to establishing a summoned gathering of people sharing a common identity.

The aspect of *calling* here is vital. The apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:2 referred to "the church [*ekklesia*, or the called out] of God . . . called [*kletos*] to be saints [sanctified ones—those set apart]." It is the special calling of God, as well as the presence of the Holy Spirit in the minds of those who heed that call, that identifies the Church of God as a unique assembly of people (Acts 2:38-39; Romans 8:9, 28-30; 1 Corinthians 1:9; 2:12-13; Ephesians 4:3-6).

In referring to this calling, Jesus said, "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him" (John 6:44) and unless "it has been granted" by the Father (verse 65). Therefore, no one can become part of the Church on his own, as an act of himself. Rather, *God* initiates and guides the process by leading a person to repentance and baptism for the remission of sins and giving the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38), through which a person becomes a member of the Church.

Since it is the indwelling presence of God's Spirit that identifies and unifies God's people (1 Corinthians 12:12-13), the Church is a spiritual organism. Its members are, figuratively, "living stones . . . being built up a spiritual house" (1 Peter 2:5). God the Father and Jesus Christ live within this "house" of believers through the Holy Spirit (John 14:23; 1 John 3:24).

Likewise, Ephesians 2:19-22 describes the Church as a "holy temple . . . built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit." The physical body of each individual member is also called "the temple of the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 6:19).

The imagery of a unified spiritual organism is more directly brought out

in the fact that Jesus Christ is referred to as the living Head of the Church, which is described as "the body of Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:27; Ephesians 1:22-23; 4:12; Colossians 1:18).

The Bible refers to the entire Body of Christ or an individual congregation by the name most English versions translate as "the church of God," and to more than one congregation as "the churches of God" (plural). In 12 instances in the New Testament, the name of the Church occurs with the distinction "of God" (e.g., Acts 20:28; 1 Corinthians 10:32; 11:22; 15:9; 1 Timothy 3:5). This is in keeping with Jesus' prayer on the night before His death, "Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me" (John 17:11).

Yet because the Church is the *Body of Christ* and He referred to it as "My church," we also see the description "churches of Christ" (Romans 16:16). Still, "the church of God" is the common name. And we also see place names used to signify particular congregations. For example, we read of "the church of God which is at Corinth" (1 Corinthians 1:2; 2 Corinthians 1:1), "the church in Cenchrea" (Romans 16:1) and "the churches of Galatia" (Galatians 1:2). Again, the reference is to a called-out gathering of people.

From the very outset God determined to call His people of this age: "For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son . . . Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called" (Romans 8:29-30).

These are intended to be God's "firstfruits" in the spiritual "harvest" of mankind—an initial gathering of people into God's family prior to bringing the rest of humanity into this relationship following Christ's return (compare Matthew 9:37-38; John 4:35; Romans 8:23; James 1:18). (See the chapters titled "The Festivals of God" and "The Resurrections and Eternal Judgment," beginning on pages 34 and 57.)

The faithful patriarchs and prophets of the Old Testament are among these firstfruits in the formation of the Church as God's spiritual temple—it "having been built on the foundation of the apostles [of the New Testament] and prophets [of the Old], Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone" (Ephesians 2:20).

There are many parallels between the nation of Israel in the Old Testament and the New Testament Church of God. The Israelites were considered firstfruits, but they disobeyed God (Hosea 9:10). Israel was God's "firstborn" (Exodus 4:22). And the New Testament Church is the "general assembly and church of the firstborn" (Hebrews 12:23).

Israel was initially, as mentioned, God's *ekklesia* (called-out assembly or church) in the wilderness (Acts 7:38). The nation was to be a "special treasure" to God, "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:5-6). And the Church is now to Him "a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a

holy nation, His own special people” (1 Peter 2:9).

Paul in Romans 11 explained that, despite nationwide disobedience, there would always be a faithful remnant of Israel—and that the Israelites who repent, along with gentiles (non-Israelites), could be grafted in to Israel. He told gentile converts to Christianity, “If you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Galatians 3:29).

In Romans 2:25-29 he explained that being reckoned as a Jew is a matter of obedience through a right heart in the Spirit: “He is a Jew who is one inwardly.” He also referred to the Church as “the Israel of God” (Galatians 6:16).

Thus the Church is spiritual Israel. And some prophetic references to Israel, Jerusalem and Zion apply to the Church. This is not a replacement theology claiming that all prophecies and promises to Israel are fulfilled in the Church. For clearly there is still a role to play for the physical descendants of Israel. National promises and prophecies still apply to them. (See the chapter titled “Promises to Abraham,” beginning on page 43.) Rather, the Church is a forerunner in the covenant relationship God promised to Israel.

The physical nation of Israel broke God’s former covenant, the lesson being that a nation blessed with abundance, the best laws and even God’s visible presence and intervention would not succeed in sustained obedience to Him. Only through a change of heart would this be possible.

So God said He would “make a *new* covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah” (Jeremiah 31:31; Hebrews 10:16-17)—a covenant in which there would be forgiveness of sins and lawful obedience evermore through God’s law being written on the people’s hearts (accomplished through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit).

This covenant has been initiated with the Church. It is in fact a marriage covenant (see Jeremiah 31:32). The Church is betrothed to Christ as a bride to a husband and will spiritually marry Christ at the time of His return—this relationship being the spiritual reality upon which human marriage is to be modeled (Ephesians 5:22-33; 2 Corinthians 11:2; Revelation 19:7, 9).

In preparation for that time, God has called us out of the evils of this world (John 17:15-16) and sets us apart by the truth of His Word (verse 17). Jesus has also directly commissioned His disciples to proclaim the gospel, or good news, of the Kingdom of God to the world as a witness (Mark 16:15; Matthew 24:14). He further told them to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19), feeding Christ’s flock (see John 21:17) and, in the footsteps of John the Baptist, “make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1:17).

The proclamation of the gospel is to be accompanied by a call to repentance (Mark 1:14). As part of that, Jesus and His disciples set an example of warning about the consequences of sin—including destruction

prophesied to come on nations and individuals.

The preaching work of the Church, coupled with the combined testimony of individual lives of Church members, provides a powerful message of hope and illumination to a darkened world (Philippians 2:15; Matthew 5:14-16). Members of God’s Church are transformed by the renewing of their minds through the power of God’s Holy Spirit (Romans 12:2).

The Church also provides a haven for fellowship (Acts 2:42; 1 John 1:7), encouragement (Hebrews 3:13; 10:24) and spiritual nourishment (Ephesians 5:29; Colossians 2:19). God has given spiritual gifts to every member for the edification of the body (Romans 12:3-8; 1 Corinthians 12:4-30; Ephesians 4:7-8, 11-16). These gifts are to be exercised with love (1 Corinthians 13:1-3). Loving one another establishes members’ credibility as disciples of Jesus Christ (John 13:34-35).

As an organized body and spiritual nation, the members of the Church have different roles and responsibilities. Some are placed into positions of leadership, preaching and teaching to help members reach their potential, promote unity and protect against false teachings (see Ephesians 4:11-16). The ministry of Jesus Christ is to exercise its spiritual authority for the service and benefit of God’s people. Christ said to let “he who governs [be] as he who serves”—following His own example of selflessly serving and giving (Luke 22:26-27).

Part of the ministry’s responsibility, along with proclaiming the gospel, is to baptize and lay hands on new converts for the receiving of the Holy Spirit. (See the chapter titled “Water Baptism and the Laying on of Hands,” beginning on page 27.)

As part of their work, they have also been authorized to, in Jesus’ name, cast out demons and lay hands on the sick with anointing oil and pray for healing (Mark 16:17-18; James 5:13-18). Yet, while God has established this authority and practice and often intervenes according to it, He may require further conditions such as faith, repentance, obedience and persistence in prayer.

Even so, there are times when in His infinite wisdom God chooses to not intervene at the time or in the manner prayed for. Still, we trust that “all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28). The personal duty of every Christian is to “seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness,” in which case all other needs will ultimately be taken care of (Matthew 6:33; see verses 25-34). (See the chapter titled “Repentance and Faith,” beginning on page 24.)

With the Christian faith having been “once for all delivered to the saints” during the first century (Jude 13), Church members were encouraged to hold fast to the teachings and traditions of Jesus Christ and the apostles as found

in Scripture (2 Thessalonians 2:15). Yet they were also warned against false teachers proclaiming a different gospel and a different portrayal of Jesus (2 Peter 2:1; Galatians 1:6-9; 2 Corinthians 11:4).

Paul warned that apostasy would arise from within the Church and draw people into error (Acts 20:29-31). And he wrote of a “mystery of lawlessness . . . already at work” (2 Thessalonians 2:7). Historically, the original apostolic Church, which adhered closely to God’s law, faded from view as a great false Christianity assumed prominence. Most of what goes by the name of Christianity today is saturated with teachings and practices originating in ancient pagan religion and philosophy. This is a major aspect of what the Bible calls “Mystery, Babylon the Great” (Revelation 17:5).

Yet in spite of persecutions and periods with very small numbers, true Christianity never disappeared. Jesus promised that His Church would never die out (Matthew 16:18) and that He would never leave or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). He promised to be with His people “even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20), empowering them to do His work. We believe that we in the United Church of God, an International Association, are carrying on in this same tradition.

When Christ returns to the earth to establish the Kingdom of God over all nations, the called-out ones of His Church will be glorified and made perfect through resurrection and instantaneous change to rule with Him (Revelation 2:26; 3:21; 5:10; Daniel 7:22, 26-27), having become teachers and judges over men and even angels (1 Corinthians 6:1-3). (See the chapter titled “God’s Purpose for Mankind,” beginning on page 46.)

(For more details, download or request *The Church Jesus Built, This Is the United Church of God* and *The Book of Revelation Unveiled*.)

## Tithing

*We believe in tithing as a way of honoring God with our substance and as a means of serving Him in the preaching of the gospel, the care of the Church, attending the festivals and helping the needy (Proverbs 3:9-10; Genesis 14:17-20; 1 Corinthians 9:7-14; Numbers 18:21; Deuteronomy 14:22-29).*

**T**o “tithing” means “to give or take the tenth of.” In Scripture it refers to giving a tenth of “all the increase” (Deuteronomy 14:22) derived from one’s produce, property or income for the support of a religious

purpose. The motivation to tithe is a worshipful recognition of God as the Creator and Possessor of the entire universe and everything in it, including ourselves.

Although tithing became a codified, or written, law under the covenant God made with ancient Israel at Mount Sinai, it was historically practiced among those who were faithful to God before that covenant. Abraham, after defeating a coalition of kings who had kidnapped his nephew, tithed on the spoils of the war to Melchizedek, priest of God Most High (Genesis 14:18-22).

Abraham obviously understood giving a tenth as the appropriate way to honor God with one’s physical possessions. It is also noteworthy that Abraham gave the tenth to Melchizedek, a representative of the Creator God. (In fact, this same Melchizedek was the divine Word who was later born in the flesh as Jesus Christ, as is shown in Hebrews 7:1-3.)

Abraham recognized the underlying premise for giving a tithe to God: He is the actual “Possessor of heaven and earth” who made his victory and all blessings possible.

God reminds us throughout the Bible, and people of God respectfully acknowledge, that everything belongs to God (Exodus 19:5; Job 41:11; Psalm 24:1; 50:12; Haggai 2:8). “And you shall remember the LORD your God,” Moses told Israel, “for it is He who gives you power to get wealth” (Deuteronomy 8:18). Tithing is thus, first and foremost, an act of worshipful recognition of God as our source of existence, blessing and providence.

Jacob also followed the example of his grandfather Abraham. When God reconfirmed to him the promises He had made to Abraham, Jacob promised God, “Of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth [or tithe] to You” (Genesis 28:20-22).

The practice of tithing was later incorporated into the covenant with Israel as a written law. The tribe of Levi, devoted to the nation’s religious service and not given an inheritance of land from which to derive increase (Numbers 18:23), was to receive the tithe of Israel’s agricultural produce in return for its service. The Levites, based on what they had received in tithes from the people, in turn tithed to the priestly family of Aaron (verses 26-28).

As time passed, the tithe was carelessly neglected. Following the Jewish return from Babylonian exile, God corrected the nation over this matter in the strongest of terms (Malachi 3:8-10). Failure to tithe, God said, was tantamount to robbing Him, and the people were consequently cursed. Yet He also promised that renewed obedience in tithing would result in blessings from Him so abundant that “there [would] not be room enough to receive it.”

Actually, God said here that the people robbed him in “tithes and offerings”—showing that they were expected to give additional offerings beyond their tithe, the amounts of which were personally determined. Offerings could be given at any time but were specifically required during God’s



festival seasons, when each was to give as he was able, in accordance with the blessings he had received from God (Deuteronomy 16:16-17).

Several centuries later, Jesus Himself clearly upheld the practice of tithing, stating: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin [garden herbs], and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. *These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone*” (Matthew 23:23).

Rather than abolishing the practice of tithing, Christ plainly confirmed His will that tithing should indeed be practiced in even seemingly minor aspects of one’s increase, along with sincere adherence to other “weightier [or more important] matters” they were obviously neglecting.

As tithes and offerings in Israel were given to the tribe of Levi for their livelihood and service to God, the Church in the first century provided financial support for Christ’s ministers to carry out their work. Instances of and principles relating to this practice are found in several passages (see Luke 10:1, 7-8; 1 Corinthians 9:7-14; 2 Corinthians 11:7-9; Philippians 4:14-18; Hebrews 7).

In Deuteronomy 14 we see the practice of tithing required for two other purposes—having the means to attend and celebrate God’s festivals (verses 22-27) and caring for the poor and needy (verses 28-29). Since we believe in observing God’s festivals (listed in Leviticus 23) and we believe in taking care of the poor and needy, we acknowledge the continuity of the tithing described for these purposes.

The United Church of God teaches that tithing remains a universal law and that one’s willing obedience to this law reflects the unselfish, giving nature of our Creator and Provider (2 Corinthians 9:6-8).

Concerning administration of this law, it is the duty of the Church to teach people to tithe, but it is the responsibility of the individual to obey. Tithing is a personal matter of faith between the individual and his Creator.

We teach that anyone devoted to following God should obey Him in this fundamental way, but it is not appointed to the Church to enforce and regulate tithe-paying. Because of the economic complexities in today’s societies, the Church regularly receives many technical questions about tithing, and we seek to provide wise administrative guidelines according to God’s will and direction.

Regarding voluntary giving beyond the tithing that God requires, He desires that we be generous with the blessings He’s given us—willing to help others through contributing to the work of His Church in proclaiming His truth and caring for the needs of members. And we are to help the needy we encounter as we are able. Scripture shows that while we must properly provide for our families and be wise stewards of our resources, we are also to be giving and caring people.

Through tithing and additional voluntary offerings that spring from willing and cheerful giving (2 Corinthians 9:6-8), we both honor God and support the physical means for doing His work of proclaiming the gospel to the world and making disciples among all the nations (Matthew 24:14; 28:19-20). God has provided the perfect financial system, which takes care of the needs of His work, the personal need to attend His festivals and the need to care for the poor.

(For more details, download or request *What Does the Bible Teach About Tithing?*)

## The Resurrections and Eternal Judgment

*We believe that the only hope of eternal life for mortal humans lies in the resurrection through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. We believe that at the return of Jesus Christ a resurrection to spirit life will take place for all who have been God’s faithful servants. We believe that after Jesus Christ has ruled on earth for 1,000 years there will be a resurrection to physical life of the vast majority of all people who have ever lived. We believe that, after these people have had an opportunity to live a physical life if they become converted they, too, will receive eternal life. We also believe that those who reject God’s offer of salvation will reap eternal death (1 Corinthians 15:19, 42-52; Acts 23:6; John 5:21-29; Romans 6:23; 8:10-11; 1 Thessalonians 4:16; Ezekiel 37:1-14; Revelation 20:4-5, 11-15; John 3:16; Matthew 25:46).*

The teachings on the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment are listed as two of the fundamental doctrines of Christianity leading to perfection and eternal life (Hebrews 6:1-2). Without the resurrection of the dead, Christ would not be risen and our faith would be in vain (1 Corinthians 15:12-19). Human beings are mortal, with no inherent immortality. Furthermore, man is incapable of giving eternal life to *himself*—thus necessitating a resurrection. Moreover, we must understand that God is the final Judge and determiner of a person’s eternal fate.

The Bible makes clear that there is no conscious awareness in death

(Ecclesiastes 9:5, 10; Psalm 6:5). Death is repeatedly compared in the Bible to sleep (Job 3:11-17; 14:10-12; Psalm 13:3; Isaiah 57:1-2; Daniel 12:2; John 11:11-14; 1 Corinthians 11:30; 15:51; 1 Thessalonians 4:14). No conscious immortal soul leaves the body at the moment of death, whether to go to dwell in bliss in heaven or to suffer unending torment in hellfire. (See the chapter titled “Humanity,” beginning on page 12.) These concepts come from false pagan religion and a misreading of Scripture.

We find in 1 Corinthians 15 that the resurrection is the hope of all mankind. *Resurrection* means a raising up or rising. Biblically, it refers to the raising of the dead to life again. The Scriptures teach the resurrection of “all who are in the graves” (John 5:28), but there is an order in which all the dead will be resurrected (1 Corinthians 15:23-24). The Bible reveals that some will be resurrected to everlasting life and others are to be sentenced to eternal death (Daniel 12:2-3; Revelation 20:13-15).

Resurrections are possible because God has the ability to give life. God, through the One called the Word, who became Jesus Christ, gave life to the first man, Adam. Jesus has the same power to give life to a human being a second time (John 5:21; 6:44, 54). Both the Father and the Son have life within themselves (John 5:26).

This inherent power of God can produce both physical and spirit life. God has power to resurrect one from the grave in physical or spirit form (1 Corinthians 15:35-38). Indeed, God has demonstrated that He has the power to resurrect to physical life (John 11:43-44; Matthew 27:52-53) and to spiritual life (Matthew 28:6-7).

Resurrections are also possible because Christ Himself has been raised (1 Corinthians 15:20-22). His resurrection as a living Savior made possible the salvation of all people. Thus, mankind would die and perish forever were it not for Christ’s resurrection (Romans 5:10; 1 Corinthians 15:26, 55).

God’s plan for mankind’s salvation requires the resurrection of all who die (John 5:28). The apostle John referred to *three* resurrections in Revelation 20—one to eternal life (verses 4-6), one to physical life (verses 11-12) and one to death in the lake of fire (verses 13-15). (Although the last verses cited here do not mention a resurrection specifically, the incorrigibly wicked of past ages, who have rejected God’s offer for salvation, will need to be resurrected to be cast into the lake of fire.) Let’s consider each of these in turn.

*The first resurrection* is called by that name: “. . . They lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years . . . 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 20:4-6).

This resurrection will take place at the second coming of Christ when the

righteous dead will be resurrected to immortality (1 Corinthians 15:50-52; 1 Thessalonians 4:14-17). Called “the resurrection of life” in John 5:29, it is also referred to as a “*better* resurrection” (Hebrews 11:35) because it is to immortality and rulership with Christ during the Millennium.

Then Christ “will reward each according to his works” (Matthew 16:27). While salvation itself is a free gift of God not based on works, one’s works demonstrate how much a person has grown in God’s way of life and will be a factor in determining each person’s degree of responsibility in God’s Kingdom (see Matthew 25:14-30; Matthew 19:11-27).

*The second resurrection* will take place at the end of the 1,000-year reign of Christ and the saints. “But the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished” (Revelation 20:5).

This resurrection, also known as the general resurrection or Great White Throne Judgment (see verse 11), is further described in verse 12: “And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened [evidently meaning the books of the Bible now opened to their understanding]. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life [meaning opportunity for being listed with the saved]. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books.” That is, they are evaluated over time—according to how they live by what they then learn—not instantly condemned.

John 5:29 calls this “a resurrection of judgment”—not “of condemnation,” as some Bible versions render the words here.

The Judge here and in all such judgment, it should be mentioned, is Christ: “For the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son” (John 5:22). This is because Jesus experienced life as a human being (verse 27; Hebrews 4:15).

The second resurrection is a resurrection back to physical life (see Ezekiel 37:1-14). It will include the vast majority of all people who have ever lived—people who never knew God and His great purpose for them. It will be an exciting time when billions of people from all periods of history will come back to life (Matthew 11:20-24; 12:41-42).

While these people will have a second opportunity for physical life at this time, it will be their *first* opportunity for salvation and glorious immortality in God’s family. They will be given ample time for learning and growing in God’s way of life. Truly, God’s plan includes everyone. He is not willing for any to perish but that all should come to repentance and salvation (2 Peter 3:9; 1 Timothy 2:4). Yet some, even with sufficient understanding and opportunity, will still refuse to comply.

*The third resurrection* will take place near the conclusion of God’s revealed plan for mankind. This will be a resurrection to physical life of all those throughout past ages who, though fully aware of God’s truth and

purpose, have willfully chosen to reject His offer of eternal life.

They will be brought back to be justly punished by death in the lake of fire along with those who are unrepentant at the end of the second resurrection period. “And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire . . . which is the second death” (Revelation 20:15; 21:8; see also Hebrews 10:26-29; 2 Peter 3:10-12).

This is not a presently burning place of torment, but a fire that will burn on the earth in the future for only a time. As mentioned, our loving God gives everyone an opportunity to have eternal life and wishes no one to perish. But if people ultimately refuse to repent, the punishment is the second death—utter annihilation through incineration, ending their lives and existence quickly and forever (Malachi 4:1, 3; Matthew 10:28; 25:46).

This is an eternal judgment and punishment—not because the torment goes on forever, as it certainly does not, but because the effects of the punishment are permanent. Those who die the second death will forever remain dead, having no possibility of a subsequent resurrection.

The three resurrections reveal the order of God’s awe-inspiring plan for all humanity. “It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment” (Hebrews 9:27), and that requires a resurrection for everyone who has ever lived.

(For more details, download or request *What Happens After Death?, Heaven and Hell: What Does the Bible Really Teach?* and *God’s Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind*.)

## Jesus Christ’s Return and Coming Reign

*We believe in the personal, visible, premillennial return of the Lord Jesus Christ to rule the nations on earth as King of Kings and to continue His priestly office as Lord of Lords. At that time, He will sit upon the throne of David. During His 1,000-year reign on the earth, He will restore all things and establish the Kingdom of God forever (Matthew 24:30, 44; Revelation 1:7; 11:15; 19:16; 20:4-6; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-16; John 14:3; Isaiah 9:7; 40:10-12; Hebrews 7:24; Jeremiah 23:5; Luke 1:32-33; Acts 1:11; 3:21; 15:16; Daniel 7:14, 18, 27).*

Jesus Christ came to the earth around 2,000 years ago to bear the sins of many, “and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him” (Hebrews 9:28, NIV). At that time His reign over all nations will commence with the awesome announcement, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever” (Revelation 11:15, NASB).

The future coming of the Messiah, the Christ, as King of Kings and Lord of Lords is a truth frequently attested to in the Bible. It is promised in the Old Testament (Isaiah 40:10; Daniel 2:44; Micah 1:3) and reaffirmed in the New Testament (Matthew 24:30; John 14:3; Acts 1:11; Revelation 1:7; 19:16).

Trusting in Scripture as God’s Word, then, we fully believe in the personal, visible, premillennial return of the Lord Jesus Christ (that is, immediately preceding or at the commencement of His prophesied 1,000-year reign).

His return will not happen in secret, for everyone alive will see Him (Matthew 24:30; Revelation 1:7). Great supernatural sounds will accompany that event: “For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God” (1 Thessalonians 4:16). Kings of the earth will attempt to make war against Him, but He will swiftly overcome them (Revelation 17:14) to at last bring peace.

Leading up to this event will be the worst period of calamity ever. Jesus said there would be “great tribulation, such as has not been seen since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be” (Matthew 24:21). Jeremiah 30:7 says it will fall hard on the descendants of Jacob or Israel: “Alas! For that day is great, so that none is like it; and it is the time of Jacob’s trouble, but he shall be saved out of it”—that is, after enduring it.

The earth itself will then be rocked with cataclysmic upheaval during the period of God’s judgment on all mankind referred to in many scriptural passages as “the day of the LORD.” It will culminate with Christ’s return and reign.

The prophet Zechariah proclaims God’s message in this regard: “Behold, the day of the LORD is coming . . . For I will gather all the nations to battle against Jerusalem . . . Then the LORD will go forth and fight against those nations, as He fights in the day of battle. And in that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which faces Jerusalem on the east . . . Thus the LORD my God will come, and all the saints with You . . . And the LORD shall be King over all the earth” (Zechariah 14:1-5, 9).

Jesus Christ, the One the Israelites knew as God in the Old Testament (see John 8:58; 1 Corinthians 10:4), will fulfill this prophecy. (See the chapter titled “God the Father, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit,” beginning on page 4.)



In submission to the will of God the Father, Jesus will sit on the throne of His human ancestor King David in ruling from Jerusalem over Israel and the gentile nations (Isaiah 9:7; Jeremiah 3:17; 23:5; Luke 1:32; Romans 15:12), establishing the Kingdom of God as a literal global government—“a kingdom which shall never be destroyed . . . and it shall stand forever” (Daniel 2:44).

During the first 1,000 years of this reign, Christ will inaugurate “times of refreshing . . . the times of restoration of all things” (Acts 3:19, 21). This age to come, the wonderful world tomorrow, will be a time of peace, righteousness, justice and abundance (Amos 9:13-14; Isaiah 2:2-4; 11:1-9; Micah 4:1-5). The enemy of God and mankind, Satan the devil, will be banished during that time (Revelation 20:1-3). (See the chapter titled “Satan the Devil,” beginning on page 10.)

Jesus will be assisted in His reign by the saints—His faithful followers from all of human history—who will be resurrected as He returns. They will then become immortal children of God (1 Corinthians 15:50-53), rise to meet Christ in the air (1 Thessalonians 4:17) and join Him in conquering the earth’s rebellious nations and in establishing the Kingdom of God (Psalm 149:5-9; Revelation 5:10; 20:6). We are assured that under Christ “the saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom, and possess the kingdom forever, even forever and ever” (Daniel 7:18).

The Millennium will be followed by a brief release of Satan, as an important lesson to mankind, and then by his permanent removal (Revelation 20:7-10). On the heels of that will come another resurrection through which all who have ever lived will be given the opportunity to be saved and receive eternal life (verses 5, 11-12). And after this will come the permanent destruction of the incorrigibly wicked, those who ultimately refuse to repent, in the lake of fire (verses 13-15; 21:8). (See the chapter titled “The Resurrections and Eternal Judgment,” beginning on page 57.)

Finally, the earthly environment will be transformed into “a new heaven and a new earth” (Revelation 21:1) and the glorious city of New Jerusalem will descend from heaven to the earth along with God the Father, who will at last dwell in the midst of His children, now immortal (verses 2-3). “And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things [will] have passed away” (verse 4).

This is the culmination of God’s plan of salvation, when Christ “delivers the kingdom to God the Father . . . For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be destroyed is death” (1 Corinthians 15:24-26). The immortal children of God, submitted to Christ and the Father, will then inherit “all things” (Revelation 21:7)—the entire universe. (See the chapter titled “God’s Purpose for Mankind,”

beginning on page 46.) And “of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end” (Isaiah 9:7).

This is the awesome salvation for which we wait—to commence at the glorious return of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. “For yet a little while, and He who is coming will come and will not tarry” (Hebrews 10:37). As He declares in the Bible’s last chapter: “And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work” (Revelation 22:12). Yes, Jesus Christ is returning. The King is coming—soon! So in the words of Hebrews 10:23, “let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful.”

(For more details, download or request *The Gospel of the Kingdom, The Book of Revelation Unveiled, You Can Understand Bible Prophecy and Are We Living in the Time of the End?*)

## Preaching the Gospel, Preparing a People This Is the United Church of God



What’s the story of the people behind the publication of this booklet—and many others that explain the real truths of the Bible? How are they committed to living by Jesus Christ’s admonition to live by every word of God (Matthew 4:4; Luke 4:4)? How does the United Church of God differ from other churches? What is its origin? If you’d like to learn more, download or request your free copy of *This Is the United Church of God*.



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