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Horizons

Vol 9 No 6

November/December 2005

addressing the important issues for today and tomorrow



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Churches Of God Outreach Ministries

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recorded for us in the Scrip-
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by what the Scriptures re-
veal about life, and the
horizons beyond**

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an association of independent
churches, to make known the good
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It is distributed free on request, being a co-
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Tulsa, OK 2005

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new Horizons

Issue No 54

November/December 2005

Can anyone improve on the marriage option?

The last half century has, in the Western world, witnessed a seed-change in attitudes to human sexuality. And not least among professing Christians. Fifty years ago, for example, divorce was rarely addressed—especially by ‘the authorities’, secular and religious. Then into the churches came increasing numbers of divorced men and women. Usually Christian divorcees were not considered fit to hold church office. A re-think on the Bible teaching led to a more relaxed approach.

More recently marriage has been undermined by society—aided and abetted, at least in the UK, by Government policies. Youth has observed and learned from their parents that marriage is considered by society to be of little importance; just ‘a piece of paper’, and to be dissolved at will. The result? Up to fifty percent of young people in some countries are happy to live together without formalizing the relationship in marriage. [See Panel] Though many retain the aspiration to marry ‘sometime’.

In Perspective

Today’s mature generation (by age)—fifties up—can recall a more settled era. Divorce was rare and often a stigma. To ‘live in sin’—no matter how stable—was the road to hell and was unusual. The couple involved were the subject of whispered gossip. Not any more. Today arrangements like this are generally

viewed as ‘normal’.

Such behaviour, however, has long been a hidden aspect of European and American culture. Indeed in medieval times it was not always possible to say who was married and who were just ‘living together’. The established Church for centuries had tried to muscle in on marriages, to always have a priest preside over them and to have the ceremony ‘churched’. That was not always the case.

Marriage... the best option

Marriage had, throughout history as in Bible times, been a family affair, arranged between the two families with or without the consent of the couple, and not requiring the services of priest or rabbi. The ceremony, when there was one, was sometimes in the home of one of the parties and went unrecorded. Such an arrangement today would be labelled by some as ‘co-habitation’.

The Church—Roman Catholic and Nonconformist—triumphed and it came to be accepted that a ‘man of the cloth’ had to be present to bless the union. As State power grew and society more complex, they too sought control by commanding civil registration of every marriage. Only in recent times has it become possible to marry outside a church building. Anywhere goes—hotel, beach, registry office, hot air balloon; all are fine as long as properly State-registered.

The Marriage Process

That a man and a woman should be joined as a single person stems from human beginnings. As our children mature they are to separate from their

parents and focus on their relationship with their spouse. The focus in a family—the only permanence—is the relationship between husband and wife. Children move on. The husband–wife relationship is the very first divine institution.

Common experience recognizes that a man and a woman, with few exceptions, need each other, that it isn’t good to be alone, that each complements and completes the other. In Bible terms, marriage is a ‘covenant of companionship’. And despite times of near anarchy mankind in general has recognized the need for regulation of each unique union.

In most cultures there is what used to be termed the ‘betrothal’ (‘be true’). When the two were betrothed it was a binding commitment to be joined as one. It was the first step in the marriage. Today it is known as an ‘engagement’. Gifts were exchanged and a public declaration made, a celebration given with friends and family. The whole neighbourhood knew of the arrangement and respected it.

In some cultures, during the time between betrothal and wedding the covenants or contracts were drawn up—sometimes verbal, usually written. But there was the implication of permanence, and the betrothal period was imbued with the same restrictions as post wedding, the main restriction being that they remained sexually faithful to one another. To betray the commitments of betrothal was a reason for ending the relationship—unlike the modern engagement which too often is broken off for trivial reasons. The length of the

betrothal varied—in Bible times it has been estimated to be up to a year, but could be much shorter.

Then comes the wedding celebration which varies in form from culture to culture, but which always includes a further public statement of commitment and the move to a shared home. There is no clear Bible pattern for the form of a wedding ceremony.

Sex Without Responsibility

Western society has degenerated in all matters sexual. The demise of moral instruction (as in Sunday Schools or secular education) has spewed on to our streets children with the morals of alley cats. Unrestrained youths, some barely out of nursery school, promiscuously prowl the corridors of our schools, our High Streets and our villages. Teen pregnancy is at an all-time high, usually burdening society with the cost of their irresponsibility. Pregnancy takes two, however, and the male rarely shoulders responsibility. In old-fashioned medieval English terms, both parties are 'fornicators'. In the Bible it is *sin*.

The term means someone who has a sexual relationship without commitment or responsibility. Such are 'bed-hoppers' seeking to express their unrestrained lusts wherever opportunity affords. The term applies equally to lusty teens and to the married.

Anciently, as in Corinth, religion was often allied with 'temple prostitutes'. Men in the process of their worship went from one of them to another: it was fornication (Gk *porneia*, I Corinthians 6). Sexual relations without commitment is what is utterly condemned in the Christian Scriptures and is as pertinent today as then. Today, though, there is not the excuse of a required religious rite!

Law of Life

Such promiscuity, then and now, has dire consequences: unwanted

pregnancy (surprise, surprise); sexually transmitted disease; sterility; abortion with all its physical and emotional hazards; the heartbreak of family disruption and, too often, divorce and its consequences.

While there has never been a perfect society, yet modern Government, fuelled by foolish liberalism, has

failed to learn the enormity of policies which undermine chaste family life. For that is at the heart of the sexual revolution. The promotion of grotesque notions of sexual equality and failure to encourage marriage and the two-parent family through education, financial breaks and adequate support services have destroyed family life and, together with overgenerous welfare, poured alcohol-fuelled feral children onto our streets. Officialdom also actively promotes sterile sexual relationships in our schools.

Moral teaching—the Maker's instruction manual for successful living—is for all mankind. It is for the street urchin, for every teen, for all mankind of whatever age and in whatever age and whatever faith. Stray from the Creator's teachings and disaster, personal and national, follows.

The essence of this divine instruction is 'the Law' (*Torah*, instruction). Throughout human history this has been God's guiding principle for every aspect of life. The Government and the people who ignore the divine instruction will bear the natural consequences. God doesn't have to do anything!

Since the 'age of innocence' in Eden ended, the human race has been largely left to its own devices, its own reasoning. The exception is God's model nation of Israel. The 'Law of Life' was incorporated in detail in their national constitution, with accompanying appropriate penalties. It no longer exists.

All governments are held responsible for good governance—and no better model than the legal system divinely given to the nation of Israel. Those who do not commit to the divine covenant in Jesus

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Is Cohabitation Harmful?

In a recent article in *Psychology Today*, the publication warned against cohabitation of couples prior to marriage. The article pointed out that "couples who move in together before marriage have up to two times the odds of divorce, as compared with couples who marry before living together. Moreover, married couples who have lived together before exchanging vows tend to have poorer-quality marriages than couples who moved in after the wedding. Those who cohabited first report less satisfaction, more arguing, poorer communication and lower levels of commitment."

In spite of these observations, the article stated:

"Thirty or 40 years ago, cohabitation was relatively rare, mainly the province of artists and other questionable types, and still thought of as 'living in sin.' In 1970 only about 500,000 couples lived together in unwedded bliss. Now, nearly 5 million opposite-sex couples in the United States live together outside of marriage; millions more have done it at some point... Some evidence indicates that women have less control over the progress of the cohabiting relationship. She may assume they're on the road to marriage, but he may think they're just saving on rent and enjoying each other's company... Cohabiting men may carry their uncertainty forward into marriage, with destructive consequences. A 2004 study... found that men who had lived with their spouse before marriage were on average less committed to their marriages than those who hadn't..."

"Cohabiting relationships, by their nature, appear to be less fulfilling than marital relationships. People who cohabit say they are less satisfied and more likely to feel depressed... While the precarious finances of many cohabiters has something to do with it, [another factor is] the inherent lack of stability. Long-term cohabitation is rare: most couples either break up or marry within five years... As a result, cohabitation is not an ideal living arrangement for children. Emotionally or academically, the children of cohabiters

just don't do as well, on average, as those with two married parents, and money doesn't fully explain the difference... Cohabitation rates may be skyrocketing, but Americans are still entirely enchanted with marriage. That's a sharp contrast with some Western societies -- Sweden, France or the Canadian province of Quebec, for example -- where cohabitation is beginning to replace marriage... In the United States, 90 percent of young people are still expected to tie the knot at some point." *reprinted from CEG Newsletter*

We can enhance our prayer life by 'beating small' its content

John Morton

Incense is a fragrant smoke obtained from burning resins. It was burnt ceremonially on an altar before the mercy seat in the Tabernacle. God said it was holy and should be burnt day and night for all of Israel's generations. Why was it holy? What was its significance? And does it have any implications for Christians today?

When Moses received instruction to build the tabernacle he was told to include an altar on which his brother Aaron was to burn incense every morning and every evening throughout all of Israel's generations:

And thou shalt make an altar to burn incense upon:.... And thou shalt put it before the veil that is by the ark of the testimony, before the mercy seat that is over the testimony, where I will meet with thee. And Aaron shall burn thereon sweet incense every morning: when he dresseth the lamps, he shall burn incense upon it. And when Aaron lighteth the lamps at even, he shall burn incense upon it, a perpetual incense before the LORD throughout your generations. Ye shall offer no strange incense thereon, nor burnt sacrifice, nor meat offering; neither shall ye pour drink offering thereon (Exodus 30:1, 6-9).

God provided a recipe from which the incense was to be manufactured:

And the LORD said unto Moses, Take unto thee sweet spices, stacte, and onycha, and galbanum; these sweet spices with pure frankincense: of each shall there be a like weight: And thou shalt make it a perfume, a confection after the art of the apothecary, tempered together, pure and holy: And thou shalt beat some of it very small, and put of it before the testimony in the tabernacle of the congregation, where I will meet with thee: it shall be unto you most holy. And as for the perfume which thou shalt make, ye shall not make to yourselves according to the composition thereof: it shall be unto thee holy for the LORD. Whosoever shall make like unto that, to smell thereto, shall even be cut off from his people. (Exodus 30:34-38)

Prayers of the Saints

Why did God say the incense was holy? David likened his prayer to incense, "Let my prayer be set forth before thee as incense; and the lifting up of my hands as

the evening sacrifice." (Psalm 141:2).

The incense was holy because it represented the prayers of the saints, "And when he had taken the book, the four beasts and four and twenty elders fell down before the Lamb, having every one of them harps, and golden vials full of odours (incense), which are the prayers of saints." (Revelation 5:8).

The altar on which the incense was to be burnt was located before the mercy seat, which represented God's throne. It was separated from the congregation by a veil through which only the high priest had access. Once a year he entered the 'holiest of all' with blood to offer for the sins of the congregation. This ceremony foreshadowed the time when Christ the high priest of the New Testament, offered his own life for the sins of all mankind and entered the presence of God the Father on His throne in heaven (Hebrews 9:6-15). At the precise moment Christ died the veil in the temple was miraculously torn in two (Matthew 27:51) signifying a major event had taken place. It meant that those whom God called through Christ, could now have direct access to the Father. Effectively, in prayer, they could now come before the very throne of God, "Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need," (Hebrews 4:16).

Just as the priesthood in ancient Israel were given a recipe from which to manufacture their incense so have their spiritual counterparts in this age been provided with a recipe for their prayer. It was provided by non-other than our high priest, Jesus Christ:

After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen. For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." (Matthew 6:9-15).

This provides a structure on which to build a prayer covering the things that are important and pleasing to God.

Make Prayer Work for You

The formula for prayer was not a mantra to be vainly repeated as many do (Matthew 6:7), but an outline of subjects to be considered (weighed and measured), expounded and discussed in person with God the Father to whom the saints now have direct access. Not as if talking to a God hidden behind a veil, but face to face with a loving Father who is deeply concerned for our wellbeing and future. It is a structure to which can be added certain aspects represented by the ingredients of the incense to provide a well-balanced relationship with God through prayer.

Stacte

The first ingredient of incense was *stacte*. *Stacte* is a gum that exudes from certain trees in liquid drops that harden and are known as 'tears'. The *stacte* or storax shrub grows in abundance in the lower hills of Israel. Those tears represent the tears shed in prayer, an example set by Christ himself, "Who in the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death, and was heard in that he feared" (Hebrews 5:7).

Do we pray with *stacte*? Do we shed unfeigned tears as we cry out to God for help? Do we shed tears of true repentance? What about the tears when we weep and mourn for what is happening around us in this world today as we pray for God's Kingdom to come, "Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted." (Matthew 5:4). Do we shed tears when we receive forgiveness, or when we forgive others? Are there heart-felt tears in our prayers when we discuss the confusion that abounds in the churches of God today. Do we experience tears of joy and thankfulness as prayers are answered and God's hand is so apparent in our lives.

Onycha

Some confusion has arisen among Bible scholars by the use of the Greek word 'onyx' in the Septuagint. Onyx is an agate with a fingernail like opacity that

has for some reason been associated with a claw shaped shellfish. However, the Hebrew word '*shecheleth*' is believed to refer to a resin with a nail-like shine. According to the *Encyclopedia of Bible Plants* (F Nigel Hepper 1992) *onycha* is more likely to be a plant resin. Other sources (W Walker, *All the Plants of the Bible*) indicate that it is the rock-rose that grows about three feet high, a soft glutinous resin exudes from its leaves and stems. It is highly aromatic and fragrant. It is also credited as having great medicinal properties.

The resinous substance with medicinal properties seems to be the most likely ingredient for the sacred incense when considering the healing effect prayer has.

We include *onycha* in our prayer by praying for those in need of healing. Christ had great compassion for the sick, "And Jesus went forth, and saw a great multitude, and was moved with compassion toward them, and he healed their sick." (Matthew 14:14). The requests from brethren who are suffering from all sorts of illnesses simply cannot be ignored. Christ also had compassion on those who needed spiritual healing, "But when he saw the multitudes, he was moved with compassion on them, because they fainted, and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd." (Matthew 9:36). It is important to pray for Christ's return to bring about that spiritual healing.

Galbanum

The third ingredient is *galbanum*. This one almost seems out of place. It comes from a plant that is found growing from Syria to Iran. It belongs to the same family as fennel and has a sharp biting smell. The resin when burnt gives off a pungent, rather disagreeable odour. This ingredient equates with some of the unpleasant things we need to pray about.

We are to examine ourselves carefully, "Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be rebates?" (II Corinthians 13:5). A genuine self-examination can be a very unpleasant experience. It is not easy to go down on our knees before the Head of the Universe and confess our sins, to admit that we are wrong, to realise before God that we are like filthy rags, unworthy and

undeserving.

Frankincense

The fourth and final ingredient is the one that we have all heard about – *frankincense* – a resin from a tree that grows in the Himalayas in India and on the Arabian peninsula. It is recognised as the finest burning incense in the world and its name means 'free lighting'. It is referred to as pure frankincense. We pray for our thoughts and deeds to be purified before God, "Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded." (James 4:8). This is done by, "Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ;" (II Corinthians 10:5).

When all these ingredients are mixed together they produce something that is very precious, pleasing and holy to God.

The priests of ancient Israel gathered the ingredients, which were crushed to a powder, weighed out, mixed together and melted down into a large block which was more easily transported. Each day the High Priest would chip off some of the solid block, crush it into fine powder and pour it over red hot coals to release the beautiful fragrant smoke, "And thou shalt beat some of it very small, and put of it before the testimony in the tabernacle of the congregation, where I will meet with thee: it shall be unto you most

holy." (Exodus 30:36).

Like that large block of incense there is just so much to pray about that we cannot cover everything in one session. All we can do is chip off a little each day, crush it to powder by getting down to fine detail, praying for specific events, individual people, their needs, their healing and well-being, rather than praying in broad statements. The incense was to be burnt perpetually meaning we are to pray continually and be ready to pray instantly as needs arise, "Rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; continuing instant in prayer;" (Romans 12:12).

Burning the resins on hot coals is reminiscent of the fiery trials we must face from time to time. When trials become hot and fiery we immediately cry out to God for help. Just as the heat of the coals releases the aroma of the incense instantly, our prayers in times of need are instantly released. And God is there expecting our prayer and ready to "*meet with thee*" (Exodus 30: 6 above), implying that He hears our prayer and will respond. He doesn't want us to quit and walk away when we feel the heat of those trials. He gets great joy when we seek Him out in fervent prayer, "*Ointment and perfume (incense) rejoice the heart:*" (Proverbs 27:9). Our prayers bring God great pleasure.

Incense burnt on the altar before the mercy seat represented the prayers of the saints and each ingredient represents an aspect of prayer that can be assimilated into the prayer outline that Christ provided to achieve a well-balanced prayerful relationship with God. By coming daily before His throne confessing our sins and with sincere repentance that leads to the purification of thoughts and actions we can also pray effectively for the physical and spiritual well-being of others. Our prayer can achieve a great deal, "*Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.*" (James 5:16).

When we come before God to burn our incense in prayer, whether on a regular daily basis, or instantly in the heat of fiery trails, we know that our prayers are heard by our Father, to whom they are precious and holy. **Ω**

www.cgom.org

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The heart-wrenching scenes of Jewish settlers being torn from their homes—many of more than a quarter century—has recently dominated the media. Is Israel’s dream becoming a nightmare? Or is this a step towards peace?

The ‘ethnic cleansing’ of Gaza by the Israeli Government has been hailed by many as a vital step towards peace. Yet for others it is a horrific rejection of God’s promises.

There cannot be anything but sadness to see a land, less than a century ago a barren desert of sand-dunes but transformed by diligent effort into a land of pleasant fertile greenery, now razed to the ground, and by the Israeli authorities. A desperate act of peace-making? Or an affront to the divine plan?

The logic is clear. Either give up the Gaza Strip to the Palestinians—or include it as a part of Greater Israel. Either choice has challenges. Choose the former and it is unlikely Gaza will not become a base for more Hamas terrorism. Choose the latter and Israel is saddled with a million and a half Palestinians, two-thirds of whom are dependent on welfare hand-outs from the UN.

Given the demographics—far faster population increase among the Palestinians—the choice is untenable for the Israeli economy. And, of course, there’s the added political pressure exerted by the Big Beasts in the world’s Zoo. So a mere eight thousand Settlers are thrown to the wolves.

Divine Intervention

The media portrayed many Settlers crying out to God, from the synagogues and as they were dragged away, for deliverance. It didn’t come.

Perhaps God isn’t interested. Perhaps He will step in dramatically in the weeks ahead to ‘enforce His will’. After all, God is all-powerful. Or, perhaps there’s another explanation for His seeming inactivity.

Jews, dispersed for centuries, have longed for a national Homeland. Though Jews have lived in the area for hundreds of years, the modern revival of the concept of an Israeli State began late nineteenth century and approached reality in

Jerusalem... 'a burdensome stone'

1917 with the *Balfour Declaration* of the British Government. Post World War II the United Nations agreed to the territory becoming a Jewish state, provided the occupants were not displaced.

Prophecy Fulfilled

The new-born Jewish state was and is seen by many Jews (though not the Orthodox) and Christians as fulfilled prophecy. Indeed late nineteenth century writers had, based on the Bible, predicted its imminence. However, a note of caution must be registered.

God has hands-on control in our world. He raises up kings and kingdoms and He destroys them. He stirs up the minds of earth’s prime movers to fulfil His will. And He plans and acts *long-term*. Men and nations are manipulated sometimes over centuries. A prophecy fulfilled may initiate a process that evolves over decades, over centuries. And a fulfilled prophecy may have taken decades even centuries to mature.

The Coming Return

Many Bible prophecies remain to be fulfilled. Some may appear minor, others are catastrophic. Still on the horizon is the high point, the pivot, of prophecy: *the return of Jesus as King of kings and Lord of lords*. He is the focus of all Bible prophecy, and around that event is a cluster of end-time prophecies—many yet to be fulfilled.

And indeed the return of the sons of Jacob to their God-apportioned property—the Land of Israel from the Mediterranean to the Euphrates, and from Lebanon to Egypt—is a part of earth’s history we are yet to witness in its fullness.

The territory deeded to the *House of Judah* (Joshua 15) was all the land from the western shores of the entire Dead Sea and westward to the Mediterranean, including Gaza. It did not include any other area of modern Israel. (This may account for some of Israel’s present challenges.) The rest of the Land was deeded to the other Tribes—the *House of Israel*. These are still dispersed around the world.

A New Birth

Since the State of Israel was born in 1948 life for her citizens has been a fierce struggle, surrounded as she is by nations intent on ‘driving her into the Sea’. Thousands of Jews have in the last fifty years been murdered—rockets, suicide killers, subversives. It’s a far cry from the predicted peaceful end result.

When Jesus returns he will permanently restore the Jews to God’s land. There will be genuine and lasting peace and no need for fragile ‘Agreements’. No hostile neighbours. No ugly dividing walls. No military armed to the teeth. No enemy within. And no hypocritical international condemnation. It will be a ‘new birth’ for this despised people.

But Israel’s troubles are not yet over. Prophecy indicates a future scattering of the sons of Jacob-Israel with more death and destruction and worldwide dispersion. Jerusalem, symbolic of the entire land, will stay divided. It will remain—as we now see—a ‘burdensome stone’, a heavy weight, to all who meddle with it. It’s an awesome thought, but God has time and again warned that those who mistreat the sons of Jacob will suffer as a result. Spain, Germany, Poland, the USSR—all have lost empire or prosperity after persecuting the Jews, the most visible of Jacob’s offspring.

Prophecy in the Making

The return is inevitable. God will see to it. Israel’s on-going troubles echo their first occupation of the land of Canaan some three and a half millennia ago. As then, they face hostile nations. As then, there is neglect *Torah*. And as then they lack trust in the LORD to deliver to them the Land, suffering both internal and external pressure.

At German hands, and with international collusion, about one third of Jews at that time—including an estimated quarter-million Jewish Christians—were slaughtered during the Hitler regime. Since, several million or so have migrated from around the world into the Jewish state, though millions more live comfortably and safely, despite increasing anti-Semitic incidents, in the western democracies. They, too, will experience the

cont’d p.8

Remember Lot

Lot's wife gets a lot of attention. Can Lot himself teach us anything?

Anyone striving to 'live by the Bible' in the modern world struggles.

The Bible—the Christian Scriptures—assumes a self-existing God 'without beginning and without end'. Christians start from that premise, but are confronted daily with rejection of that immutable concept by science, all too often from family, from friends and certainly from the media.

Bible standards of behaviour are classed today as old-fashioned, passe' and not for modern society. Believe the wholesale dismemberment of infants in the womb is horribly evil and you are just plain silly. Believe the optimal and foundational relationship for most of mankind is a man married to a woman for life and you evoke derision. Believe the sexual relationship should be confined within marriage and you are out of step with modernity. Believe Christians are to worship the Creator as He prescribes—and not with holy days He has condemned, as Christmas, Easter—and you are seen, especially by other believers, as somewhat odd. Believe that the media, especially television, magazines, prurient public displays plumb the depths of depravity—and you are a prude.

All such ideas are forcefully promoted by society, and by those who govern us. Sadly, all too many Christians cave in to the world around us.

Ancient Wisdom

Anciently the whole Jordan valley in Israel was well-watered, fertile, a veritable 'garden of Eden'. That's what attracted Abraham's nephew, Lot [see panel]. And he wasn't alone.

The indigent population of Canaanites had also chosen to settle there. The land produced abundantly. Life was good. They built towns, principally Sodom and Gomorrah, and lived comfortably. But their lifestyle became debauched.

Addressing Judah, the sixth century BC prophet Ezekiel had this to say about that populace:

... your younger sister, that dwells at your right hand, is Sodom and her daughters. Yet have you not walked after their ways, nor done after their abominations: but, as if that were a very little thing, thou were corrupted more than they in all your ways. As I live, says the Lord GOD, Sodom your sister has not done, she nor her daughters, as you have done, you and your daughters. Behold, this was the iniquity of your sister Sodom, pride, fullness of bread, and abundance of idleness was in her and in her daughters, neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy. And they were haughty, and committed abomination before me: therefore I took them away as I saw good

(ch 16:49-52)

Sodom is notorious for its rampant homosexuality—'sodomy'—its violent homosexual rape. That is, says God through Ezekiel, 'abomination'. They 'gave themselves over to fornication' (Judges 1:7). Notice God's indictment of Sodom: iniquity (perversity) manifest as 'fullness of bread, abundance of idleness, neglect of the poor and needy, arrogance'.

Some Background

The Biblical account of Abraham's occupation of Canaan also recounts events concerning his nephew, Lot. Abraham (Abram) had responded to God's invitation to leave behind the corrupt civilisation of Babylon and to emigrate to 'a land I will show you'. Terah, Abraham's father and of the godly line of Shem, accompanied him but died in Haran in northern Iraq. Terah's family were idolatrous (Joshua 24:15). Lot went with his uncle

Isn't all of that reflected in our society? Ancient Israel surpassed them, says God. And do not we in the modern world? Read the newspapers, watch the television! The Western world is satiated with riches. Unmonitored welfare provision spawns 'abundance of idleness'. Yet the truly 'poor and needy' are neglected. Our nations, as with Sodom, come under God's righteous judgment.

That's what confronted Lot each time he opened his front door.

Man of Character

Like all Christians, Lot had his problems. But against all the odds he set himself to resist his times. Here's the apostle Peter's pen portrait of Lot (II Peter 2:7,8): "[The LORD] delivered just Lot, vexed with the filthy conversation [licentious behaviour] of the wicked: For that righteous man dwelling among them, in seeing and hearing, vexed his righteous soul from day to day with their unlawful deeds". He was 'just'—a righteous man, harassed day in and day out by the sight and sound of the licentious behaviour of his neighbours. But consistently resisting their wild sinful excesses.

Abraham had ascertained from the LORD that there were fewer than ten righteous people in the 'cities of the plain'. Ten were not found. But Lot was one, and as a result the LORD delivered only him, his wife and his daughters—but not his sceptic sons-in-law—from the catastrophic judg-

Abram when they left from Haran, named after Lot's father, Abraham's brother. (Haran had died in Ur, Genesis 11:28.) Abram had married Sarah in Ur. They ended up in Canaan, God's chosen land.

Following a famine they migrated to Egypt where both Abram and Lot prospered. They became 'very rich', and to such a degree that, to accommodate their flocks, they had to separate, Lot perhaps selfishly moving to the lush and well-watered plain of Jordan.

ment He inflicted on the area.

The apostle Paul peered down the centuries to our day. Here's how he described the world of the twenty-first century:

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

. A portrait of Sodom—and a portrait of our world

Notice Paul's admonition to Christians.: "...from such turn away".

The apostle Peter gives us the same counsel:

(This sounds like the modern Christmas celebrations!)

Forasmuch then as Christ hath suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves likewise with the same mind: for he that hath suffered in the flesh hath ceased from sin; that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh to the lusts of men, but to the will of God. For the time past of our life may suffice us to have wrought the will of the Gentiles, when we walked in lasciviousness [unbridled lustful excess], lusts, excess of wine, revellings, banquetings, and abominable idolatries: wherein they think it strange that you run not with them to the same excess of riot, speaking evil of you: who shall give account to him that is ready to judge the quick and the dead"

(I Peter 4:1-5)

The apostle John, too: "*Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and*

the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passes away, and the lust thereof: but he that does the will of God abides for ever. Little children, it is the last time (I John 2:15-18)

Watch!

We do indeed live in 'perilous times'. Our children are subverted in the schools, in the playground, in the streets. Television, the internet, 'teen magazines corrupt. Our youth are subjected to intense sexual peer pressure—and Christian families are as likely to succumb as others. Adults, too. Marriage is ignored, even despised, seen as irrelevant. Polls indicate as many Christians as non-Christians co-habit and divorce.

Jesus himself, in addressing the end-times, said: "*And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of the many will be made cold. But the one having endured to the end—this one will be saved*" (Matthew 24:12-13).

Let's 'sigh and cry for all the abominations' that surround us. Let's be vigilant, constantly aware of God's will, behaving as did Jesus our example.

As this world's systems begin to totter it is vital that every one who professes the name of Jesus Christ should 'remember Lot'. **Ω**

Rejoice in God's Festivals

Since man was created God has given us special days—'appointed times' (Heb *mo'ed*)—on which to worship. They have remained unchanged through the millennia.

These special days are 'holy convocations'. That is, they are days when the LORD meets with His people as they gather for Bible teaching by qualified leaders, for fellowship and for enjoyable festivities.

Who We Are

The *Churches of God Outreach Ministries* is an international association of independent local assemblies - Christians who meet together for worship, instruction in the faith and fellowship. Each assembly is self-governing according to Bible principles, but co-operates through our Conference with other like-minded assemblies to work towards agreed evangelistic goals.

These goals are within the framework of the commission set for his church by Jesus: "going, therefore, disciple all nations, baptising them...and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20). He further commanded that we "Shepherd...[and] feed my sheep".

To these ends we publish Bible-based literature (eg our quarterly *Newsletter*, a bi-monthly outreach magazine *New Horizons*, the *Bible Basics* home study course). The *Outreach Ministries* also supports a network of independent fellowships and scattered brethren.

We cordially invite all independent fellowships of whatever size - or individuals - to associate with us in this worldwide ministry. Our *Statement of Beliefs* and a *Publications Catalogue* is available from any of our addresses. We are pleased to offer you, without charge, any of our publications.

The festivals occur in spring (seven days), early summer and in the autumn (eight days). Seven of the days are days in which Christians cease from our usual work or business but may freely enjoy the physical blessings God provides (Nehemiah 8:2,12). The weekly Sabbath and the solemn Day of Atonement are more intensely contemplative, with activity more restricted (Isaiah 58:13).

Readers are invited to request the free booklet: ***God's Holy Days***

Marriage... cont'd

are indeed 'a law unto themselves'. It is not for Christians to judge them but to be an example to them of the divine way.

For Christians, the divine Law is 'written in the heart' through the indwelling Holy Spirit of God. Of all people we are answerable directly to our Creator and Saviour. [Request the free article *The Law of Life*]

Co-habitation

Given the negative example of modern society, Government failure and the impotence of the established churches, it's not surprising that youth simply ignore marriage and live together without 'tying the knot'. Such relationships are rarely permanent. [See Box, p.2] They certainly are defective—sinful—in Christian terms, ignoring the fundamental purpose of this fundamental divine institution.

However, this 'semi-permanence' in a world of sexual freedom is surely preferable to the lewd and loose mo-

ality that stalks our nation. Co-habitation (living together without formal commitment) may fulfil the purpose of companionship. It may 'save money'. It may thumb the nose at cultural norms. It may provide an outlet for physical sex. *But it ignores the psychology of permanence implicit in the marriage bond.*

- Marriage reflects the relationship between Christ and his church
- Marriage fills the need we have for companionship
- Marriage completes each individual: physically, emotionally, intellectually, spiritually
- Marriage is the optimal relationship in which to beget and raise godly children
- It is through marriage that the divine purpose is fulfilled of nourishing spiritual sons and daughters for the kingdom of God

Co-habitation is in ignorance of the very purpose of marriage. Embark on life together believing you can get out when the going gets tough—as it will—makes breakdown almost inevitable. That 'piece of paper' is a major key to the very purpose of the relationship. Sadly, few are concerned about life's purpose.

Christian Marriage

Central to human relationships is the instruction the Creator gives us regarding the most intimate aspect of daily life: the marriage relationship. Get that right and we can flourish,

personally and nationally.

In general, the Christian response to moral decline has been limp. However, the standard remains unchanged from the guidance offered in the Christian Scriptures—the only source ever revealed of the will of our Creator. The responsibility is personal.

Sound Education

Young Christians, and children of godly parents, must be taught the value of self-restraint. They need guidance from parents, school and church as to godly behaviour in relation to marriage and sex.

The notion of permanence must be instilled. Only by bi-lateral commitment to stay together 'till death do us part' can the purpose of marriage be properly fulfilled.

Our children should be encouraged to follow the marriage process: *wise selection* of a partner, *betrothal* (seen as binding preparation for marriage), the outworking of *detail* (finances, contract *etc*), then the formal joining together in a joyful public *wedding ceremony* and *celebration*.

Christians, those men and women with the Spirit of God, are to commit to a lifetime monogamous relationship—or, for those so gifted, to celibacy, that they may be joyfully dedicated to a work for God. **Ω**

Request, free:

**Marriage...just a piece of paper?
Spend a Lifetime—Together**

Jerusalem... cont'd

horrors of a future predicted holocaust encompassing their host nations.

As recorded in the Bible's end-time prophecies the nation of Israel is constantly in the world's headlines—a sign of the approaching culmination of the divine plan. The LORD—Jehovah, Jesus Christ—is inexorably working out his plan, now from heaven, soon in person at his coming presence on Earth as King of kings, and Lord of lords..

The Scriptures foresaw and comment on a Jewish (House of Judah) presence in

There are around fifteen million Jews worldwide— about six million each in Israel and in the United States. Most of the remainder are scattered in the other democracies: Britain, Canada, Australia *etc*. Palestine's Jewish population when the State was founded (1948) was just over 600,000

In the past five years there have been nearly 23,000 terrorist attacks on Israelis in Palestine. These have resulted in 1073 Israeli deaths and over 7000 injured.

57%— 12,776—of the attacks, including suicide bombers, were against Jews living in Gaza. *MaozIsrael*

Palestine in the decades prior to Messiah's return. Until then troubled times are foreseen. However, the LORD's direct intervention to bring about His plans for the restoration of all Israel, including Judah, to the land of 'Palestine' has not yet been fully implemented.

A permanent peace awaits the coming of Messiah, Jesus. At that time Judah will become one nation in their deeded territory, together with the returning Ten Tribes in their allotted portions from the Euphrates to the Nile, and ruled over by one King. **Ω**

MiniStudy

Christmas...holiday or holy day?

When the LORD your God shall cut off the nations from before you, wherever you go in to dispossess them, and you dispossess them, and dwell in their land; take heed to yourself that you be not ensnared to follow them, after that they are destroyed from before you; and that you inquire not after their gods, saying: 'How used these nations to serve their gods? even so will I do likewise.' You shall not do so unto the LORD your God; for every abomination to the LORD, which He hates, have they done unto their gods; for even their sons and their daughters do they burn in the fire to their gods. All this word which I command you, that shall you observe to do; thou shall not add thereto, nor diminish from it.

(Deuteronomy 12:29-13:1)

The darkness at the end of the year invites us to party to lighten the dreary days. The religion of most people living in the northern hemisphere fills the gap with some form of celebration. For most Christians it is Christmas. For Jews, Hanukah. And for those without some official recognition of the death of the old year and the birth of the new—well, Christmas sounds good. It has almost become a global celebration. If you are not personally ‘into religion’ well, never mind, it’s a chance of a knees-up. And indeed Christmas has largely become a secular holiday when all work grinds to a halt—sometimes for two or three weeks. The months leading to December 25 are an eternity of credit-fuelled frenzied shopping and poisoned by Christmas ‘music’. Christmas has become a holiday, not a holy day.

- *Christmas* is promoted by the Christian church as the time of the birth of Jesus—the Messiah, Christ
- The name derives from the Roman Catholic ‘Mass of Christ’
- The timing derives from the ancient celebration, known as *Saturnalia*, of the annual re-birth of the sun god: that is, when the sun begins its ascent from our shortest days in late December
- During the festival, homes—and churches—are today festooned with evergreen trees, brightly-coloured baubles, candles; songs lauding the birth of Jesus as ‘a babe in the manger’ are sung; food is consumed in excess; and not infrequently the celebrations dissolve into drunken debauchery. All such practices were derived from the worship of ‘*gods that are no gods*’
- None of this, of course, is a concern to most Westerners. Christmas is a holiday, party-time. And anyway, who cares about religion?
- But what if you are a Christian, have strong beliefs in Jesus and in the Christian Scriptures? The text quoted above should give pause for thought
- It is a well-established historical fact that Jesus was not born in the dead of winter, but in the early autumn; likely the first day of the Festival of Tabernacles.
- The Scriptures do not provide the date of the birth of Jesus as it does the divinely-appointed holy days (*see* Leviticus 23). Christmas celebration is a late starter—from around the mid-fourth century AD
- There is no New Testament confirmation that the brethren celebrated the birth of Christ; the focus is on his death and resurrection, and on God’s Spirit indwelling His people
- Jesus, the apostles and all members of the early church observed the Biblical holy days. Each of these highlights aspects of the life and mission of Jesus
- However sincere a believer may be, the observance of Christmas is an affront to the Saviour. Jesus perfectly reflects the teachings of the Old Testament, and expects his disciples to follow his example
- Many Christians around the world have come to understand the importance and significance of the Biblical days, and faithfully observe them

Request the free articles: *The Feast of the Nativity*
and
God’s Holy Days

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