

# outreach

*The Newsletter  
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Matthew 28:19-20

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## GROUNDHOG DAY

The 1993 film of this title summarizes [see box] what we may experience from time to time! It happens on a personal level and it all too often happens on a grander and global scale.

For most folk most days are the same old, same old. Get up, eat, work, home, bed—relieved only by the week-end. (More so if unemployed or Third World.) And for the most part we do see the same people every day.

It's often called 'dull routine', but it is life.

More serious is what happens outside our control. We expect a regular tax hike. We expect rising living costs. We expect our Governments to repeat their mistakes.

Wrote philosopher George Santayana: *'Progress, far from consisting in change, depends on retentiveness. When change is absolute there remains no being to improve and no direction is set for possible improvement: and when experience is not retained, as among savages, infancy is perpetual. Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.'* Progress depends of conscious awareness of past actions—and their results. It's a universal principle, and one echoed in the Christian Scriptures.

Writes the apostle Paul: *'...all that was written of old has been written for our instruction'* (Romans 15:4). 'Remember' occurs frequently in the Scriptures.

## End Time?

It's a principle we might apply to debate about 'the end time'. It's a recurring theme throughout history, and in and out of Christianity: we have been here before, repeatedly—groundhog day.

Of course, one day we will wake up to the real thing. Science tells us humanity has limited existence and earth will be swallowed up by a dying sun—though perhaps a billion years from now!

## Time of the Signs?

The Bible and other prophetic works would indicate a shorter time-span—but it's a time unknown to man, and decided by the Father. Are we in that time, now?

The Roman Empire ended in the chaos of climate change, invasion, famine. Life continued. The first millennium closed with widespread expectations of 'the end' But life went on. So too 1844, 1975, 2008. Next according to some is 2012.

Listen to the apostle Peter: *'... there shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts, And saying, Where is the promise of his coming? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation'* (II Peter 3:3-4). No divine *cont'd p.4*

### The Plot

*A weather man is reluctantly sent to cover a story about a weather forecasting "rat" (as he calls it). This is his fourth year on the story, and he makes no effort to hide his frustration. On awaking the 'following' day he discovers that it's Groundhog Day again, and again, and again. First he uses this to his advantage, then comes the realisation that he is doomed to spend the rest of eternity in the same place, seeing the same people do the same thing EVERY day.* **Wiki-  
paedia**

*[Groundhog Day is still celebrated on February 1.]*

## Burning Lights: *the local church*

*‘...let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven’*

This statement of Jesus is a fundamental of the Christian faith. Normally applied to individuals—and it does—yet it is in structure collective and refers to Christians together. Wherever Christians assemble we are to be a light. We are the lampstand Jesus has set in that location.

Increasingly we are cajoled into using dim energy-saving bulbs and dimmer switches in our homes. We might ask about the quality and intensity of the light we shed as a local assembly: energy-saving? dim?

### Spirit-filled Works

In Jesus’ words, surely our ultimate purpose is to *‘...glorify your Father in heaven’*. And the means is *‘...that men may see your good works’*.

God is glorified before mankind when His nature and character is displayed in the lives of those in whom dwells His Spirit—His church, the Body of Christ.

When a local assembly is *‘filled with the Spirit’* miraculous events occur—as in Acts 2:4. They speak in languages they never learned, they raise the dead and heal the sick, they spread the good news of salvation through Jesus (*ch 13:2*)—all supernatural actions carried out by the Spirit through the hands and tongues of mortals.

Such demonstrations of the divine power inspire awe, they turn some to faith in Jesus (Galatians 3:5)—and drive others to persecute and kill believers. Just as Jesus predicted.

### Centres of Excellence

The local church, then, is to be *‘a city set on a hill’*. It is highly visible and radiates the glory of the Son to all around. It illuminates the darkness that settles on their part of the world.

The apostle Paul highlights an important function for local churches: *‘...All that you have been taught by me in the hearing of many witnesses, you must hand on to trusty men who shall them-*

*selves, in turn, be competent to instruct others also* (II Timothy 2:2 Weymouth). Elsewhere he states: *‘...*

*He Himself appointed some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, some to be pastors and teachers, in order fully to equip His people for the work of serving’* (Ephesians 4:11-12).

Each local assembly, then, is to become a ‘centre of excellence’ wherein the brethren are brought to Christian perfection through the educational ministry of those more established and skilled in the faith. Jesus imparts spiritual gifts to those who commit to him—and the responsibility of the leadership is to nourish these gifts. And for all to then employ their gifts in the service of Christ. It was a pattern established by an illustrious predecessor, the prophet Samuel.

### Prophetic Schools

In Samuel’s time (around 1100BC) Israel was settled in spiritual darkness. Their endemic sin brought on them frequent invasion by surrounding tribes—notably the Philistines.

However, Samuel either established or developed seminaries of sorts for the training of ‘sons of the prophets’—instruction in the Law, musical training, prayer and other functions for worship (I Samuel 10:5). They were being overseen by Samuel (*ch 19:20*). They were indeed a spiritual ‘light’ to those around and used their training to positively influence them. It has been suggested that synagogues originated from these ‘schools’.

Elijah, then Elisha, later carried on these training schools—the ‘sons of the prophets’ (II Kings 2:15). They were overseen by established inspired prophets, who were a kind of ‘father’ to them (*cp 1 Timothy 1:2*). Paul himself was often accompanied by several ‘trainees’ (*eg Acts 20:4*), and also instructed them by means of his personal letters to them (*eg to Timothy, Titus*). He, too, likened himself to a ‘father’ of the church (I Thessalonians 2:11)

Each local assembly of Christian believers must become such a ‘school’. The brethren are there to be nourished from new-born spiritual ‘babes’ to maturity so that they together may become a light shining in a dark place. Sadly, too many assemblies are ‘bog-standard comprehensives’ that fail the brethren and our LORD rather than training the brethren and becoming a centre of spiritual excellence enlightening their appointed area. Ω

## Blueprint for Prosperity

**God's Law is the perfect way of life. It teaches respect for the natural world and for humans (image of God). Left to ourselves we can uncover its virtues—but through painful experience. Better to accept its validity and apply it. Our Governments must take heed if we are to survive**

Mankind has forever imagined living in 'utopia'. It's the perfect world. It's a world of good health and even-handed justice, a world with all nations at peace, a prosperous world overflowing with the fruits of the earth. Indeed every government purports to lead its citizens towards that happy state.

The reality is different, of course. After six millennia of civilisation we still don't know the way to achieve it. Disease is rampant carrying away millions annually. Justice is far from us. The global economy again verges on collapse and water supply is precarious, pollution destructive., global warming—natural or man-made—a threat. Add in the challenge of religious terrorism and the long-for utopia fades into a pipe-dream.

A perennial scourge of mankind is disease, and only in the past couple of centuries have we stumbled towards solutions. Throughout the Middle Ages millions were struck down by diseases like cholera, typhoid, syphilis, tuberculosis, deadly infections and gangrene. Sewage ran in the streets and water sources were contaminated. Then *hygiene* was 'discovered'.

Even today millions worldwide die annually from diseases that are preventable by sound sanitation practices—human waste, fouled water, improper sexual practices.

Then there's the *economy*. Socialism battles with capitalism but both have fundamental flaws fuelled by human *greed*. And what about international relationships. Will we ever have a global *peace* that is stable, lasting beyond a few decades? Or a *justice* system free from corruption and with *criminal activity* curbed? What mankind needs is a template for utopia!

### Ancient Blueprint

There *is* such a template—but one generally ignored: the Judaeo-Christian Scriptures. (WAIT! Before you turn your eyes aside, consider.)

Whether or not you believe the Bible is 'God's word', the fact remains that, dated some three thousand five hundred years ago, the 'Law of Moses' contains a blueprint for health, justice and crime control, stable

economics and a world at peace. Attention paid to it—and applied—would have prevented disease epidemics. (Few observant Jews, for example, died in the mediaeval plagues that swept millions to their deaths. Only 5% of the dead were Jews.) The *sanitation* laws of Leviticus are described by one author as '*...the basis of modern sanitary science*'. These laws protected Israelites from contagious diseases.

The Biblical *civil and criminal justice* system is enlightened in comparison to today's legal system. The latter favours criminality whereas in the Law of Moses there was balanced justice coupled with equality before the Law—and mercy.

If society had long-ago heeded the Bible pattern for a successful and healthy society we would be much closer to the utopia we desire. The civil and religious laws codified in 'the Law of Moses' represent the most advanced pattern for governance, and is as applicable today as then.

### An Impossible Dream

One utopian dream, however, that mankind would never achieve is *a world at peace*. No matter how many billions of dollars invested or international conferences convened or peace prizes awarded—mankind simply doesn't know the way to peace. History confirms it.

For the key to a world in harmony is not terrorism or anti-terrorism or wars

but a supernatural *change in human nature*. We all belong to 'the warrior class', all are capable of destructive behaviour given the necessity or the opportunity. It's how we are. Christians, however, must exhibit that peace in their interface with those we encounter daily—and in church.

Only the Spirit of God indwelling mankind and yoked to the strong spiritual leadership of Messiah with an agenda for radical change can transform the world and fulfil our utopian dream.

That won't happen until the promised divine intervention at a future undetermined and critical moment in man's sorry story. Ω

### Get with the programme!

*World peace may be beyond the grasp of even the best brains among us. But it will come, and the Creator is even now working out His plan to establish it. Those with 'ears to hear' can invest their lives in His programme. Those who do will pioneer that peace—here on earth—when God's time comes.*

*Request the article: **Do You Know if You are Called?***

## Freedom...to Obey

The elements of Israelite religious practice—revealed to them by God—were temporal. That is, they were rituals that focused attention on the LORD in contrast to all other belief systems—but imparted scant knowledge of eternity. Only the spiritually enlightened saw beyond the ritual of sacrifices and holy days to their spiritual significance. As wrote Paul, the rituals of the divine Law were a schoolmaster, laying the building blocks of the true faith—just like teaching the alphabet to a child.

The sacrifices were imposed ‘...until the time of reformation’ (Hebrews 10:6)—until Christ came in fulfilment. They were added to the pre-existing worship system (eg the holy days) because of Israel’s disobedience (Jeremiah 7:22), and each expressed some aspect of the life and sacrifice of Jesus.

Jesus (‘...born under the Law’) was careful to follow God’s revealed pattern for worship—but without the Pharisaic legalism and tradition common to first century Judaism. His example was followed by the apostles and the early church of God. They observed the Biblical worship but acknowledged salvation comes through faith and not by works.

### Gentile Practice

The religions of the nations distort versions of that revealed pattern. They diligently observe religious days and seasons, and their sacrifices, unlike those inspired by God, often ended in human sacrifice—even of children. The Bible records widespread instances in Canaan and elsewhere. The Aztec culture is noted for it, and it has been documented in modern Africa—ongoing in Uganda—Europe and the United States.

The observance of special times of worship other than those in Scripture of is anathema to God. In the pagan world familiar to the first Christians there were few days on the calendar not dedicated to some deity or planet *etc.* The year began on January first—as today !—with a day dedicated to Jupiter and Janus. Such were meticulously observed—often with penalties for non-observance. Different religious seasons, too, were noted—*Saturnalia*, for example, from December 17 to 24, followed by the ‘*birthday of the invincible sun god*’ on December 25.

### Converts in Bondage

The apostle Paul took the Galatian Christians to task (*ch* 1:6). As Gentiles in a Roman Province and the populace dedicated to the goddess Artemis (Diana)—described as ‘violent fanaticism’—they had revelled in the contemporary pagan religions, had been in bondage to their abominable rituals. Through the Gospel they had been freed from such spiritual chains, practices that could never bring salvation.

Now they were listening to Pharisaical influences—men who while professing Christianity yet still believed that salvation required meticulous observance of the ‘Law of Moses’—especially the rite of circumcision (*see* Galatians 5:3). [The rite itself isn’t wrong (Acts 16:3)—just the perception that it is essential for salvation.]

It is clear, of course, that Paul isn’t condemning the ancient (and only) authentic Way of worship revealed by God—see

## GROUNDHOG ...cont’d

intervention, in other words. Nothing to disturb life’s rhythm that we can’t handle, it’s claimed.

### Don’t Mock

Such mockers abound today. Some are in Government, some are lapsed believers and some are atheist and some are believers. But believe Jesus and there *will* come ‘a crisis at the close’. Whatever world order evolves will ultimately fail to solve our economic, social, religious and environmental challenges. Your life will change—it *won’t* be the same old same old.

There’s much in today’s world to cause concern, and it’s tempting to conclude we are indeed in the ‘time of the signs’ that Jesus gave us (*see* Matthew 24 *etc.*). However, whether you hope for or dread the coming end-time trial *caution* is the watchword. It is inevitable—but now is not necessarily that prophetic moment.

What’s important is that we be alert to the times, that we continue to develop our trust in our heavenly Father. As pioneers of the Kingdom we Christians are to mould our lives on the character of Jesus so that when that time suddenly envelops our world we will be spiritually prepared—even in face of martyrdom. Ω

how he promotes the holy days of Scripture in I Corinthians 5, and his own recorded observances of them in *Acts*. He objects, rather, to viewing their slavish observance as essential for salvation—and not a joyous desire to worship God as *He* pleases. Religious observances which shed light on the plan of God (eg the weekly Sabbath and the annual holy days) are proper for Christians as they reflect God’s will—but must not become ‘...a yoke of bondage’ that negates the essence of the Gospel—salvation through faith as manifest by our personal ‘...fruit of the Spirit’.

Salvation cannot be earned by any form of religious works whether pagan or Jewish. In Christ we are free from such a yoke. We grow up to Christ-likeness as we *voluntarily*—without coercion from any man or organization—make personal choices based on the inspired revelation in the Scriptures. The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments define God’s way of life—which we grow into. It is ‘...our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus’ (Galatians 2:4). Christ-like character is formed through our free personal choices and not by imposed slavish obedience.

The Galatians were being seduced—deceived—(and by professing Christian teachers) into again accepting a ‘yoke of bondage’. They are, states Paul, now through Christ *children of the Living God*—no longer *slaves* to a religious system. It’s a lesson for Christians today. Ω