

Virtual Christian Magazine

Hope And Encouragement
For The Real World

"He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God."—Romans 4:20

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John: An Apostle of Godly Love

By Jerold Aust

If you want to know about the way of God, study Jesus Christ. If you want to know the love of Christ, study John.



THE APOSTLE JOHN had an impressive biblical résumé. We first learn of him when he and his brother left their nets on the Sea of Galilee to become fishers of men with Jesus of Nazareth. He helped arrange the Passover meal and service for Jesus and his fellow disciples. He was known of the high priest and moved freely among the Jewish leadership.

John faithfully remained with Jesus' mother during her Son's crucifixion. On the morning after Jesus' resurrection, John ran with Peter to the empty tomb. He saw the risen Christ walking on the Tiberias shore. With his brother James and the other apostles, he helped establish the first church in Jerusalem. Later he served other churches in Ephesus and Asia Minor.

If that weren't enough, he also wrote five books of the Bible: the Gospel and three letters that bear his name and the book of Revelation.

John's Gospel and his three general letters focused on love. John moved about in a unique circle of love. In his Gospel he refers to himself as that disciple whom Jesus loved.

*John moved about
in a unique circle of
love*

If you want to know about the way of God, study Jesus Christ. If you want to know the love of Christ, study John.

John's background

John was a Judean Jew who knew well the geography and customs of his homeland. His meticulous attention to numbers (John 2:6; 6:13, 19; 21:8, 11), names and details substantiates him as an eyewitness to Jesus, His teachings, and miracles (John 19:35; 21:24-25).

John's father was Zebedee (Matthew 4:21). His mother was apparently the Salome who served Jesus in Galilee and was present at His crucifixion (compare Mark 15:40-41 and Matthew 27:56). Salome appears to have been a sister to Mary the mother of Jesus (compare John 19:25 and Mark 15:40).

If so, then John was Jesus' cousin and likely about the same age. Since Jesus and John the Baptist were also cousins, this would also have made him a cousin to John the Baptist, whose mother, Elizabeth, was a close relative to Jesus' mother (Luke 1:36).

John appears to have been in partnership with his brother James and his father Zebedee (Matthew 4:21), as well as with Simon Peter (Luke 5:10). They had a number of hired servants (Mark 1:19-20). He not only had his fishing business in Capernaum, he may have also had a house in Jerusalem (John 19:27). Remarkably, he was an acquaintance of the high priest in Jerusalem (John 18:15-16).

Originally John appears to have been a disciple of John the Baptist (he is apparently the unnamed disciple in John 1:35, 40). Bible history shows that after following the strong preaching of John the Baptist, he was ready to take his stand with his Savior. He was one of the first five disciples of Jesus (John 1:35-51). He was with Jesus when He performed His first recorded miracle at the wedding feast at Cana in Galilee (John 2:2-11).



Apparently after this John returned to his fishing enterprise at Capernaum. After some time had passed, Jesus called him and his brother to leave their business and follow Him (Mark 1:19-20). From this point on, John became a close friend and an eyewitness of the words and deeds of Jesus, which he wrote about in the Gospel of John.

Jesus nicknamed John a Son of Thunder (Mark 3:17). This could imply that John originally had a flaring temper.

Jesus nicknamed John a Son of Thunder (Mark 3:17). This could imply that John originally had a flaring temper. Early on, John forbade a stranger to use the name of Christ while casting out demons (Mark 9:38). On another occasion Jesus had to rebuke him for his hot-temperedness when John wanted to call down fire from heaven on a Samaritan village (Luke 9:52-56). Rubbing shoulders with Jesus, hearing Him speak of godly love and watching Him practice it among those who didn't appreciate it seemed to have transformed John into an apostle who came to exemplify the love of God.

With Peter and James, his brother, John was one of the three disciples of Jesus' inner circle (Mark 5:37; 9:1-9; 14:33). Beyond a doubt he was recognized as the one closest to Jesus. In fact, at their last Passover together, the Bible portrays John resting on Jesus' chest (John 13:23-25). They say that a picture is worth a thousand words. This image is priceless. John's writings explain why: This disciple practiced the godly love he wrote about.

A case for humility

It's interesting to observe the humility of the apostle John in the writing style he used in his Gospel. Throughout that book he wrote of himself indirectly, as though he were another person writing about him. For example, five times he wrote of himself as "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (John 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7, 20).

Let's look a little more closely at two of the five times John referred to himself this way.

In John 13, at Jesus' last Passover with His disciples, He became troubled over the fact that Judas Iscariot was soon to betray Him. Although Jesus knew that this must come to pass, it still hurt Him deeply. He told His disciples directly, "Most assuredly, I say to you, one of you will betray Me" (verse 21).

Jesus' statement greatly concerned His disciples. They began to look at one another in a different light, perhaps trying to figure out who might be the one of whom Christ spoke. At that point, John set the scene for what follows. He shared with us the fact that one of the apostles was leaning on Jesus' chest and referred to that specific person as the one "whom Jesus loved" (verse 23).

As was customary at that time, Jesus and the disciples ate this meal reclining around a low table. In this relaxed atmosphere the disciple "whom Jesus loved" was sufficiently comfortable with his master to rest on Jesus' chest. This close physical proximity substantiates John's close relationship with Jesus.

Simon Peter motioned for John to ask to whom Jesus was referring. So John asked, "Lord, who is it?" (verses 24-25).

Jesus answered in clear enough terms: “It is he to whom I shall give a piece of bread when I have dipped it.” Jesus dipped the bread and gave it to Judas Iscariot. He then told Judas, “What you do, do quickly” (verses 26- 27).

Amazingly, none of the disciples—including John—understood Jesus’ words to Judas. Some thought that He told Judas to buy necessities for the feast while others thought He instructed Judas to give some money to the poor (verses 28-29). Among other lessons in this dramatic event, John indirectly identified himself as the one “whom Jesus loved.”

John used this phrase to identify himself at another dramatic and intense moment later that same day. Even as Jesus was being crucified, He demonstrated His responsibility and great love for Mary, His mother.

“Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing near by, he said to his mother, ‘Dear woman, here is your son,’ and to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother.’ From that time on, this disciple took her into his home” (John 19:25-27, New International Version).

Jesus entrusted the care of His own mother to His beloved friend and follower, John. This, too, shows the closeness and trust the two shared.

This incident is also telling in another way. As Jesus was being put to death by the Roman authorities, John proved fearless in the face of potential accusations that he was one of Jesus’ disciples. John ran the risk of being incarcerated, scourged and crucified for being an accomplice to His Master. Yet He was not afraid to be seen supporting Jesus in the hour of His greatest need. His presence at Jesus’ feet in His great hour of trial at once validates Jesus’ love for John and John’s reverential love for Jesus. The godly love that both had for one another reassured Jesus that He could count on John to take good care of His mother from that hour on.

John understood godly love

John lived his life with godly love. He also wrote expressively about this special and unique love.

John’s Gospel is filled with many of Jesus’ discourses and conversations. John in particular wrote more about what Jesus said than what He did.

John’s three letters overflow with statements that help us understand how God’s kind of love contrasts to the human version. Let’s notice two examples of this.

In his first epistle, John gives us a direct definition of godly love: “For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome” (1 John 5:3). John knew the source of godly love, understood it and practiced it. He realized that God communicated His love through the laws He gave us by which we are to live.

John’s three letters overflow with statements that help us understand how God’s kind of love contrasts to the human version.

Jesus Himself said that God’s law could be summarized in two great commandments: Love God with all your heart, soul and mind and love your neighbor as yourself

(Matthew 22:36-40). John similarly summarized God's very nature and character when he wrote, "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16, emphasis added throughout).

John focused on the most important virtue and gift of God: godly love. There is a difference between God's love and human love. The Greek verb for God's kind of love, *agapao*, means a deliberately applied outgoing concern for others. Human love, *phileo* in the Greek, means a fondness or affection for another person. John focused on and taught about godly love as the most important virtue a human being can exhibit.

John also contrasted godly love with human love in 1 John 4:18-21: "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love. We love Him because He first loved us.

"If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also."

John knew that it was contradictory to say that we love God yet hate our brother. He knew that we humans can distort the meaning of "love" to make it mean just about anything we want it to mean. But God's love isn't like that. Godly love always puts care and concern for the other person first.

John clearly understood godly love. He knew it because Jesus had taught it to him and the other disciples. John had watched Jesus live by it and apply it for 3 1/2 years. John knew where godly love came from, its ingredients, and how it must be expressed among mankind. He believed and practiced it with all his heart.

John on Patmos

John's Gospel is filled with significant events and details from Christ's life. His record is more personal than that of the other three Gospels, and so gives us a more complete picture of Jesus' life and teachings. John, being so close to the Son of God, had many opportunities few others had. When we read the Gospel of John from this perspective, it becomes an intimate narrative.



In the 90s, John was still teaching God's love throughout Asia Minor though getting up in age. During the Christian persecutions under Emperor Domitian (81-96), he was banished to the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea.

Christ permitted the Apostle John to be exiled on Patmos for a great purpose. Now, some 65 years beyond His crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus revealed to John the dark days that lay ahead—not just during his times, but especially in the troubling and tumultuous latter days.

Responding to Jesus' command to "write" (Revelation 1:11, 19), John recorded the great prophetic events that would transpire from his time to the return of Jesus Christ.

John gives us a loving perspective of what Jesus Christ expected of him and of us. Twice in the first chapter John uses a phrase that depicts the responsibilities of Jesus' disciples, especially in the face of persecution.

In verse 2 he writes that he bears "witness to the word of God, and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, and to all things that he saw." He repeats this instructive thought a few verses later: "I, John, ...was on the island that is called Patmos for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ" (verse 9).

Notice that John speaks of "the word of God" and "the testimony of Jesus Christ." The word of God encompasses God's instruction, recorded for us in the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. The testimony of Jesus Christ can be defined as that which Christians live and teach from Jesus' life, instructions and example.

John was faithful to Christ in all these things despite the threat of persecution and death. He proved his faith and love in traumatic times, in spite of the fact that he apparently was now in his 90s. At one point John heard a loud voice in heaven commend all Christians who overcame Satan: "And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb [Jesus' shed blood] and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death" (Revelation 12:11).

John's ordeal on the island of Patmos, where Christ revealed to him what we know as the book of Revelation, was a miraculous event. Without this book, the people of God could not understand the time of the end. John's understanding and commitment to God's love and His beloved friend and Savior Jesus Christ made it possible.

The apostle of godly love

Few men really knew Jesus of Nazareth as well as John did. A mutual understanding and respect for the unselfish love of God bound their relationship. Jesus had special love for John, perhaps because John had such an abiding reverence for the godly love exhibited by His Master. Beyond this special relationship, some of John's personal traits may well have made him an easy person to love.

We've learned that, early in the life of John, Jesus nicknamed him a Son of Thunder. John's writings, however, reveal a completely different man. John changed his outlook as he followed in the footsteps of his Master, listening and heeding His teachings about godly love. He was highly regarded by Jesus and the other apostles and even more surprising, apparently by the sometimes-contrary high priest. This speaks volumes of John's character.

John was known for his humility. This apostle of godly love shunned the approbation of human recognition by writing of himself indirectly, as though he were someone else were writing about him. Godly love is at once humble and outgoing. John didn't seek fame at others' expense. Instead he served with humility.

John understood and taught godly love. He knew that God's instructions, summarized in the Ten Commandments, are an expression of love from God to mankind, then from mankind to God and human beings to other human beings. Godly love is the greatest gift God can give to mankind, and the greatest we can return to Him and share with others. John lived the love of God.

John was truly an apostle of godly love. He learned about godly love from God, who Himself is love (1 John 4:8). John taught the truth and worth of godly love and left us an outstanding example to follow.

Would Jesus Keep Easter?

By Jerold Aust

For millions of people Easter Sunday is the most important religious observance of the year. But, if Jesus walked the dusty roads of Galilee today, would He keep Easter?



EACH SPRING THE EXCITEMENT OF EASTER fills the air. Many churches prepare special Easter programs about the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. At home mothers color Easter eggs, and parents hide the brightly colored holiday symbols around the house and lawn so that, come Easter morning, their children can excitedly hunt for them.

Stuffed Easter bunnies and chocolate rabbits are seen everywhere in the weeks leading up to this major religious observance. Then there are the Easter sunrise services, where churchgoers gather to hear about Jesus' resurrection and honor that miraculous event by watching the sun come up in the east.

But what do colored eggs and the Easter rabbit have to do with Jesus' resurrection? How did these seemingly irreligious symbols come to be associated with that event?

Can we find any historical or biblical record of Jesus or His disciples keeping Easter or teaching parents and children to dye eggs and display bunnies on this holiday? Did Jesus or His apostles instruct any of His followers to meet to honor His resurrection at sunrise on Easter Sunday—or at any other time, for that matter?



If Easter were not sanctioned by Jesus or instituted by His apostles, then where did Easter come from? In other words, if Jesus were living among us as a flesh-and-blood human being, would He keep Easter or encourage others to do so?

Answers to these questions are readily available. Some may take a little research, but they become clear when we look into history and the Bible.

The apostles' record on Easter

As surprising as this may sound, nowhere in the New Testament can you find any reference to Easter. In the King James Version of the Bible (in Acts 12:4) you do find the word Easter, but it is a blatantly erroneous mistranslation that has been corrected in virtually every other Bible translation. The original Greek word there is *pascha*, correctly translated Passover in virtually every modern version of the Bible everywhere else it appears in the Scriptures. It refers to the biblical Passover originally instituted when God freed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 12:1-14).

The original apostles, from the inception of the New Testament Church to near the end of the first century, when the apostle John died, left absolutely no record of keeping Easter or teaching others to do so. From Jesus to John, not one of the apostles gave even the slightest hint of keeping or advocating the observance of what we know today as Easter Sunday.

God would much rather have us honor and obey Him according to His instructions in His Word.

However, that doesn't mean the early Church did not hold to specific religious observances. The apostle Paul, some 25 years after Jesus' death and resurrection, spoke plainly to members of the church at Corinth that they should continue to keep the Passover as Christ commanded. Paul wrote: "For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, 'Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me.' In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.'

"For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes. Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord" (1 Corinthians 11:23-27).

Paul was concerned that the Church members in Corinth observe the Passover in the right way, with reverence and proper comprehension of its meaning.

The writings of Paul and Luke, his traveling companion and author of the book of Acts, regularly mention keeping the weekly Sabbath day and the biblical festivals listed in Leviticus 23. But Easter is conspicuously absent (1 Corinthians 5:6-8; 16:8; Acts 2:1-4; 13:42, 44; 17:1-3; 18:4; 20:6, 16).

Since Easter wasn't introduced by Jesus or the apostles, where did it come from, and how did it come to be such an accepted part of Christianity?

The origin of Easter

It's not that difficult to trace the surprising origins of Easter and what it really represents. Many scholarly works show that Easter is a pre-Christian religious holiday, one that was created and developed long before Jesus' time and carried forward to the modern era through such empires as Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece and finally Rome.

Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words notes: "The term 'Easter' is not of Christian origin. It is another form of *Astarte*, one of the titles of the Chaldean [Babylonian] goddess, the queen of heaven. The festival of Pasch [Passover] held by Christians in post-apostolic times was a continuation of the Jewish feast . . . From this Pasch the pagan festival of 'Easter' was quite distinct and was introduced into the apostate Western religion, as part of the attempt to adapt pagan festivals to Christianity" (W.E. Vine, 1985, "Easter").

Alexander Hislop in his book *The Two Babylons* (1959) explores the origins of Easter. He discovered that a form of Easter was kept in many nations, not necessarily only those that professed Christianity. "What means the term Easter itself? . . . It bears its Chaldean origin on its very forehead. Easter is nothing else than Astarte, one of the titles of Beltis, the queen of heaven, whose name, as pronounced by the people of Nineveh, was . . . Ishtar" (p. 103).

Easter and the practices associated with it can be traced back to various pagan rituals. Hislop explains that "the forty days' abstinence of Lent was directly borrowed from the worshippers of the Babylonian goddess" (Hislop, p. 104). In Egypt a similar 40-day period of abstinence "was held expressly in commemoration of Adonis or Osiris, the great mediatorial god" (Hislop, p. 105).

A pre-Christian spring festival

How, then, did 40 days' abstinence come to be associated with a resurrection? Hislop continues: "Among the pagans this Lent seems to have been an indispensable preliminary to the great annual festival in commemoration of the death and resurrection of Tammuz, which was celebrated by alternate weeping and rejoicing" (Hislop, p. 105).

Tammuz was a chief Babylonian deity and husband of the goddess Ishtar. Worship of Tammuz was so widespread in ancient times that it even spread into Jerusalem. In Ezekiel 8:12-18 God describes that worship and calls it an abomination—something repugnant and disgusting to Him.

The Babylonians held a great festival every spring to celebrate Tammuz' death and supposed resurrection many centuries before Christ walked the earth. Hislop comprehensively documents evidence that shows Easter's origins precede the modern Christian holiday by more than 2,000 years!

Hislop cites the fifth-century writings of Cassianus, a Catholic monk of Marseilles, France, on the subject of Easter's being a pagan custom rather than a New Testament observance. "It ought to be known that the observance of the forty days (i.e., the observance of Lent) had no existence, so long as the perfection of that primitive Church remained inviolate" (p. 104).

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Sir James Frazer describes Easter ceremonies entering into the established church: “When we reflect how often the Church has skillfully contrived to plant the seeds of the new faith on the old stock of paganism, we may surmise that the Easter celebration of the dead and risen Christ was grafted upon a similar celebration of the dead and risen Adonis [the Greek name for Tammuz], which . . . was celebrated in Syria at the same season” (*The Golden Bough*, 1993, p. 345).

Why eggs and rabbits?

What about other customs associated with Easter? One Catholic writer explains how eggs and rabbits came to be connected with Easter. You will quickly notice an absence of any link or reference to the Holy Bible when it comes to these mythic rituals:



“The egg has become a popular Easter symbol. Creation myths of many ancient peoples center in a cosmogenic egg from which the universe is born. In ancient Egypt and Persia friends exchanged decorated eggs at the spring equinox, the beginning of their New Year. These eggs were *a symbol of fertility* for them because the coming forth of a live creature from an egg was so surprising to people of ancient times. Christians of the Near East adopted this tradition, and the Easter egg became a religious symbol. It represented the tomb from which Jesus came forth to new life” (Greg

Dues, *Catholic Customs and Traditions*, 1992, p. 101; emphasis added).

Like eggs, rabbits came to be linked with Easter because they were potent symbols associated with ancient fertility rites. “Little children are usually told that the Easter eggs are brought by the Easter Bunny. Rabbits are part of pre-Christian fertility symbolism because of their reputation to reproduce rapidly. The Easter Bunny has never had a religious meaning” (Dues, p. 102).

Honest Bible scholars freely admit that Jesus never sanctioned this pre-Christian holiday, nor did His apostles. Not until Emperor Constantine and the Council of Nicaea in 325—almost three centuries after Jesus was killed and rose again—did Easter replace the Passover, the biblical ceremony Jesus and the apostle Paul told Christians to observe.

Says the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*: “A final settlement of the dispute [whether and when to keep Easter or Passover] was one among the other reasons which led Constantine to summon the council of Nicaea in 325 . . . The decision of the council was unanimous that Easter was to be kept on Sunday, and on the same Sunday throughout the world, and ‘that none should hereafter follow the blindness of the Jews’” (11th edition, pp. 828-829, “Easter”).

Constantine’s decision was a fateful turning point for Christianity. Those who remained faithful to the instruction of Jesus and the apostles would be outcasts, a small and persecuted minority (John 15:18-20). A vastly different set of beliefs and practices—recycled from ancient pre-Christian religions but dressed in a Christian cloak—would take hold among the majority.

Would Jesus keep Easter?

Since the pagan symbols of eggs and rabbits were adopted by the Catholic Church centuries after Jesus Christ's ascension, should Christians keep this holiday or encourage others to observe it?

To answer that question, let's go back to the title of this article, "Would Jesus Keep Easter?"

He certainly could have told us to. So could the apostles, whose teaching and doctrine are preserved for us in the book of Acts and the epistles written by Paul, Peter, James, Jude and John. But nowhere do we find a hint of support for Easter or anything remotely resembling it. What we do find, as pointed out earlier, is clear instruction from Jesus and Paul to keep the Passover and other biblical—and truly Christian—observances.

Holy Scripture does not support this pre-Christian holiday and in fact condemns such celebrations. Because Scripture condemns pagan practices and the worship of false gods (Deuteronomy 12:29-32), we know that God the Father and Jesus His Son have no interest in Easter and do not approve of it.

Divine instruction or human tradition?

Jesus, in fact, is diametrically opposed to religious rituals that supposedly honor Him but in reality are rooted in worship of false gods. He makes clear the difference between pleasing God and pleasing men: "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: 'This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men'... All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition" (Mark 7:6-9).

Easter is a tradition of men, not a commandment of God. But it's more than that. It is a pagan tradition of men that, like other traditions involved in the worship of false gods, is abhorrent to the true God. Jesus and His apostles would never sanction its observance because it mingles paganism with supposedly Christian symbolism and ritual. It is rooted in ancient pre-Christian fertility rites that have nothing to do with Jesus.

In reality, most of the trappings associated with Easter reveal that the holiday is actually a fraud pawned off on unsuspecting and well-intentioned people. God wants us to worship in spirit and truth (John 4:23-24), not recycle ancient customs used to worship other gods.

Even the timing of the events used to justify celebrating Jesus' resurrection on a Sunday morning—that He was crucified on the afternoon of Good Friday and resurrected before dawn on Sunday morning—are demonstrably false, as an examination of the Scriptures shows.

For those who want concrete proof that He was indeed the Messiah and Savior of mankind, Jesus made a promise: "An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be *three days and three nights in the heart of the earth*" (Matthew 12:39-40, emphasis added).

Anyone who wants to be right with God, who wants to be a true disciple of Christ will carefully examine his beliefs and practices to see whether they agree with the Bible.

Try as some might, there is no way to calculate three days and three nights from late Friday afternoon to Sunday morning before daylight. At most, this amounts to barely more than a day and a half. Either Jesus was mistaken, or those who say He was crucified on a Friday and resurrected on a Sunday are mistaken. You can't have it both ways.

Jesus' instructions remain consistent

If Jesus walked the dusty roads of Galilee today, would He keep Easter? Certainly not. But He would be consistent because He does not change (Hebrews 13:8). For instance, He would keep the annual Passover in the same manner as He instructed His followers to keep it (1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:15-17). And Jesus would observe the Days of Unleavened Bread in the way He inspired Paul to instruct early Christians (1 Corinthians 5:6-8).

Anyone who wants to be right with God, who wants to be a true disciple of Christ, the Master Teacher, will carefully examine his beliefs and practices to see whether they agree with the Bible. Such a person will not try to honor God with ancient idolatrous practices, violating His explicit commands (Deuteronomy 12:29-32; 2 Corinthians 6:14-18; 7:1). Easter, as we have seen, is filled with idolatrous trappings.

Simply claiming that something is Christian or is done to honor God doesn't make it acceptable to God. Easter doesn't represent a resurrected Jesus Christ. Rather—difficult as it may be to admit—it merely continues the practices pagans followed thousands of years ago to honor their nonexistent gods. If we are to escape the calamities prophesied to come on those who place the ways of this world ahead of God, then we must repent of following traditions that dishonor Him (Revelation 18:1-5).

God would much rather have us honor and obey Him according to His instructions in His Word. Then He can use us to represent His holy Son, our Savior and the Messiah, who will return to earth. No greater calling can be extended to human beings. May you have the heart to seek understanding and God's perfect will.

Recommended reading

Does it matter which days and customs we keep to honor God the Father and Jesus the Son? Most assume almost any religious practices are acceptable as long as we use them in Christian worship. But what does God's Word, the Bible, say?

Be sure to request your free copy of [*Holidays or Holy Days: Does It Matter Which Days We Keep?*](#) This eye-opening booklet gives you more information about the strange customs associated with popular holidays including Easter, Christmas and Halloween. It also proves, from the Scriptures themselves, that Jesus was neither crucified on a Friday nor resurrected on a Sunday.

What about the Passover and Days of Unleavened Bread, which are observances the Bible tells us to keep? To learn more, be sure to request your free copy of [*God's Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind*](#).

Cliff-Hanger

By Jim Columbia

When you reach the end of your rope, would you be willing to let go? This modern parable makes you stop and think.



PERHAPS YOU'VE HEARD THE STORY of the mountain climber who was determined to reach the summit of a high mountain. After much preparation, he began his adventure. Desiring the glory for such an achievement, he went alone, not telling anyone of his plans. He began his final ascent as daylight faded in the western sky. As nightfall approached, he fought the feeling of being overcome by the encroaching darkness.

Only a few yards from the summit, he slipped, falling off a rocky ledge at a frightful speed. During those anguished moments, his life passed before him. Thinking death was imminent, he felt his safety rope begin to tighten around his waist.

Let go of the rope

Suddenly he found himself suspended in midair. In those first desperate moments a spontaneous prayer sprang from his lips, "God, please help me!" Then unexpectedly a deep voice from heaven responded, "What would you have me do?" The mountain climber replied that he wanted to be saved. God answered with another question, "Do you really think I can save you?"

"Of course, my Lord!" the man replied. Then God told him if he wanted to free himself all he had to do was to cut the rope. After long moments of silence, the man responded by tightening the rope around his waist.

The following morning a local mountain rescue team arrived only to find the man dead. He had frozen to death, his hands wrapped firmly around a rope tied to his waist, hanging two feet above the ground.



How tight is your rope

How tight is our rope? How many of us would obey the voice of God and let go of our rope? God instructs us not to be afraid, but to trust His Word. “For I the LORD your God will hold your right hand, saying to you, ‘Fear not, I will help you’”(Isaiah. 41:13).

How many times have we asked God to rescue us or bless us physically, financially or spiritually while refusing to obey the instructions of God’s Word? Sometimes it’s hard to see how God is answering our desperate pleas for rescue. Faith is believing what God says, and acting on that belief.

Thy will be done

Many years ago, an 18-year-old boy was critically injured in an automobile accident. His mother prayed to God for his healing by praying for God’s will to be done. Sadly, her son died from his injuries. God’s will in this matter was painful and difficult to accept, but as time passed she learned to appreciate the power behind her prayer. Jesus Christ understood what it means to pray for God’s will to be done.

Just hours before His arrest Jesus knew He was to go through the most difficult time of His life. “He went a little farther and fell on His face, and prayed, saying, ‘Oh My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will’” (Matthew 26:39). A few minutes later, when He prayed again, His prayer was a little different. “Again, a second time, He went away and prayed, saying, ‘O My Father, if this cup cannot pass away from Me unless I drink it, Your will be done’” (verse 42).

What is the difference between these two verses? In verse 39 He said, “If it is possible, let this cup pass from Me.” Then in verse 42 we read, “If this cup cannot pass away from Me unless I drink it, Your will be done.” In verse 39 we see the human side of Christ wanting to know if there was any possibility His suffering could be bypassed. Of course, He knew this was not the case, but as a human being He was greatly troubled as He contemplated what He was about to go through. Then in verse 42 we see the fact that He had accepted His fate, and indeed, was willing to face His terrible destiny on the cross.

How many times have we asked God to rescue us or bless us physically, financially or spiritually while refusing to obey the instructions of God’s Word?

He did not seek to change God’s will, but was seeking confirmation of it in the midst of His fiery trial. Jesus now sits at the right hand of God as Savior of the world, King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He yielded to His Father’s will, thus setting us an example. Seeking God’s will is the ultimate goal of every Christian.

Recommended reading

To learn more about this vital subject, why not download or order your free copy of [You Can Have Living Faith](#).

Living God's Way Works

By Rick Frazee

A mutiny in the South Seas brought nothing but woe, until a sailor stumbled across an old book.



REMEMBER THE STORY *Mutiny on the Bounty*? Contained in the story are the essentials of the true account, which occurred in the late 1700s. In 1768 King George III of England decided that certain uninhabited South Sea islands would be more useful to the empire if they could serve as sources of fresh food for His Majesty's sailors. So in 1787 the crew of the *Bounty* was ordered to transplant certain fruit-bearing trees from Tahiti to various South Sea islands.

Crew rebels

The *Bounty* arrived in Tahiti on October 26, 1788. Just a few months later, some of her crew, led by Fletcher Christian, mutinied. They were no longer willing to submit to abusive treatment from the ship's captain. In time, most of the mutineers were brought to justice. However, nine of them escaped on the *Bounty* taking with them 17 natives, including six men, 10 women and one 15-year-old girl.

In their desperation to escape the hangman's noose, they fled to a small, little known place called Pitcairn Island. Only two miles long and one mile wide, this rugged 88-acre island would become their home. Nine hardened English sailors and 17 Tahitian natives created one of the most diverse and unlikely groups imaginable.

Brave new world

Having escaped the oppressive rule, they hoped for an island paradise of peace and happiness. Instead, what came about was just the opposite. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* describes the society that sprang from this small group as "hell on earth."

They created their own culture with no rules or regulations. History is unclear on the details, but some have said that Mr. Christian was murdered attempting to steal another man's wife. Living without even the most basic rules of society, and after years of lying, cheating and stealing, only one man, Alexander Smith, remained on the island with a harem of Tahitian women and a brood of children.



The Rest of the Story

Finally, nearly 20 years later in 1808, an American ship, *Topaz* brought news of the fate of the mutineers to the rest of the world. What did the crew of the *Topaz* discover? Bruce Barton made the following observation in his book entitled *The Book Nobody Knows*; "There was no jail. There was no hospital. There was no insane asylum. There was no illiteracy, no crime, no disease. The people had no doctors, took no medicine, used no liquor... Nowhere on earth were life and property more safe."

Read the book

Alexander Smith had stumbled across the Bible. As this small group of people began to follow the precepts of God's Word, a new society began to emerge. They took the Bible literally, and began to pattern their little island world after the model they found in the Bible. As a result, God poured out abundant blessings.

As this small group of people began to follow the precepts of God's Word, a new society began to emerge

What caused this dramatic change? First, they put themselves in God's hands, totally and without reservation. They trusted God to speak to them through the words of His Bible, by prayer and study. They prayed together every morning and evening. They studied the Bible and considered it to be their authoritative guide for living.

They followed the example of the Bereans. In Acts 17:11 we read, "They received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so."

They trusted God to speak to them through the words of His Bible, by prayer and by study.

Finally, they were motivated to take action. They zealously embraced the principles they discovered in God's Word, sometimes, perhaps, too enthusiastically. When they discovered fasting, for a while they fasted twice a week. After coming to understand foot-washing as a symbol of humility, they washed each other's feet every week. Upon learning of the seventh-day Sabbath, they zealously embraced it. In short, to the best of their ability they obeyed what was revealed to them.

Abundant and impressive faith



In his book *Pitcairn Island*, David Silverman wrote, “Evidence of the modern Pitcairners’ faith is both abundant and impressive. Their close observance of its tenets involves not merely the practice and rituals; it requires many material sacrifices. The Sabbatarian restrictions on labor frequently proved galling [from the author’s point of view], as when on one of their all-important trips to gather miro-wood, unfavorable winds landed them at Henderson Island on the

Sabbath. The Pitcairners chose to return without the prized wood rather than cut and load it on the Sabbath.”

These people energetically embraced the Bible as the literal words of God, a blueprint on which to base their lives. It worked with awesome results. Even when outsiders severely criticized them for their strict adherence to biblical principles, they followed the Bible anyway.

Think about it! They were being called legalistic, yet no one could argue with the results.

What an awe-inspiring example for us today! The Pitcairners used the Bible, the power of God speaking through His Word, to overcome the worst kind of dysfunctional background and physical trials.

The next time you are discouraged or depressed, the next time you are faced with what seems to be an impossible trial, turn to the Answer Book. Look for God to reveal the answer through the textbook of life, the Holy Bible. Expect God to help you just as He helped them.

Recommended reading

Be sure to request your free copy of [Is the Bible True?](#) This booklet will help you to understand that the Bible is the authoritative Word of God, and that we can prove that fact to our own satisfaction.

Never Let Your Guard Down!

By Jim Columbia

Just as complacency can mean death to the man who hunts the giant Kodiak bear, it can bring on spiritual death to the Christian. Learn the importance of fighting complacency from hearing the true story of Allen Hasselborg.



IN 1900, A MAN NAMED ALLEN HASSELBORG moved to Alaska to become a professional hunter. His job was to supply as many bearskin robes to the civilized world as he could. These were not just ordinary bearskin robes, but those of giant Kodiak bears roaming the Aleutian Islands off the coast of Alaska. He built a cabin and docked a skiff nearby for transportation from island to island. Allen Hasselborg very successfully went to work killing bears.

He had a special way of anchoring his skiff so it was always in safe water during low or high tide. We as Christians need to anchor ourselves to our God through low times and the high times.

To prepare for the hunt, he first checked his belt, his knife and the small amount of provisions he would carry with him. Then he checked his rifle. He put a fresh cartridge in the chamber. Now, Hasselborg was prepared and on guard for whatever he might face.

We as God's people can stay prepared and on guard for what we may face by using the tools of prayer, fasting, Bible study and meditation. In fact, we are admonished to put on the whole armor of God in Ephesians 6:11-17.

No room for error

Shortly after beginning his hunt one day, Hasselborg found by far the largest Kodiak brown bear track he had ever seen. He stopped and once again checked his rifle to make sure it was right, then proceeded. He spotted the bear across a small lake and began to move in. As he continued, he temporarily lost sight of the bear. When he looked over the beaver dam from which he was hiding, the bear had moved much closer than he had expected. It was only 20 yards away, so close

he could hear the grinding of the bear's teeth as it fed. He was thrown a curve! The bear sensed something wasn't right as it stood up to have a look. Hasselborg moved two steps closer for a better position and to be sure of a fast kill. There could be no room for error.

Sometimes, as we find ourselves facing a difficult trial, there is also no room for error. However, we're all human, and we may be thrown a curve. Or we may make a wrong decision resulting in an even more difficult trial. Thankfully, God says He will never leave us nor forsake us. He even promises to rescue us if it becomes more than we can endure.

As Hasselborg took his last step, just before making the shot, a small willow branch he was standing on released, making a loud snap and splashing water and mud into the air. At that, the bear began to charge. The crack of the rifle was deafening as it rang out.

As the smoke cleared, Hasselborg saw that the bear had been hit and its forward motion began to slow. Then the giant beast was down. He first thanked his rifle for performing so well. Next, he patted himself on the back for a job well done and smiled at his accomplishment. He then turned his back on the bear and put down his best defense, leaning his rifle against a tree several feet away.

Have you ever noticed that when things are going well, we have a tendency to drop our best defense? Remember, we never know when a trial might come back to bite us. It is important never to become too self-satisfied or complacent.



The bear returns

Suddenly, a huge shadow appeared over Hasselborg. He thought that heavy clouds may be rolling in, but as he turned, he was staring into the belly button of the injured Kodiak. He knew that outrunning a bear was impossible, his rifle was too far away, and the knife in his hand was useless. He dropped his knife as the bear made its attempt to gather him in. Hasselborg made one leap and landed face down in a small ditch-like depression that was slick and muddy. He locked his fingers behind his head for protection.

“Where’s the bear and if I move, will he come and attack again?”

The bear ripped his clothing and his boots completely off but couldn't flip him over on his back because he had anchored himself by digging his hands and arms as deeply into the mud as he could. The bear bit his left shoulder, ripping flesh from his back and breaking bones.

When he came to, it was dark, and he had no idea how long he had been there. But his first thought was, “Where’s the bear and if I move, will he come and attack again?”

One thing we can always be sure of as God's people is that “the bear” will be back to maul us again! Maybe not today or tomorrow, but he will be back. See 1 Peter 5:8, “Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.”

Crawling naked and in critical condition, he made it to his boat sometime the next day. He slipped in and out of consciousness. Finally, with one last effort, he cut the anchor chain with an axe and found his way to help in an Indian village.

A warning from God

God has stern warnings for His people about becoming complacent. Consider the Laodicean church's lukewarm attitude that they were in need of nothing (Revelation 3:15-17). Christ warned that they were in danger of being left out of His Kingdom.

In Proverbs 1:24-33 we read, "Because I have called and you refused, I have stretched out my hand and no one regarded, because you have disdained all my counsel, and would have none of my rebuke, I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your terror comes, when your terror comes like a storm, and your destruction comes like a whirlwind, when distress and anguish come upon you. Then they will call on me, but I will not answer; they will seek me diligently, but they will not find me. Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the LORD, they would have none of my counsel and despised my every rebuke. Therefore they shall eat the fruit of their own way, and be filled to the full with their own fancies. For the turning away of the simple will slay them, and the complacency of fools will destroy them. But whoever listens to me will dwell safely, and will be secure, without fear of evil."

We should know our enemy, never underestimate his desire to destroy us and always be well aware of the danger he presents in our daily lives.

When Hasselborg realized that he was in trouble, he cried out to God and relied on the foundation and knowledge that he had come to depend on and live by. He survived the attack but suffered with a left arm and shoulder that never hung right or moved properly again. This was the price he paid for complacency!

We should learn from Hasselborg's story, in that we should know our enemy, never underestimate his desire to destroy us and always be well aware of the danger he presents in our daily lives. Satan is relentless and never sleeps. Never forget that Satan wants to maul us, maim us and kill us spiritually.

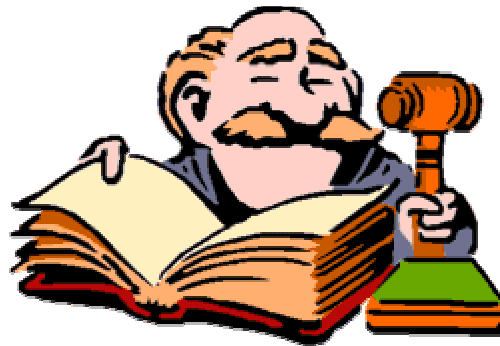
To learn more about the reality of our true enemy, Satan the devil, why not order your free copy of the booklet, [*Is There Really a Devil?*](#) Does such a being exist? Where could such a being have come from? What is his purpose—his goal—and what does he do? Learn the answers to these and other questions by reading this informative booklet.

Virtual Christian Magazine Editorial

Faith

By Tom Damour

Jesus taught the importance of enduring faith and consistent prayer. Consider the lesson of the parable of the unjust judge.



JESUS TAUGHT HIS DISCIPLES through several parables, but one of them ended with the question, “Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?” (Luke 18:7).

Some have mistakenly thought this parable teaches that we should beg and plead for God to intervene for us, and maybe if we plead long enough, He might give us the answer we seek. But this is not what the parable means at all.

Two lessons

There are two main points we should glean from the parable. First, Jesus wanted us to learn we should be consistent in our prayer life. This is clearly brought out in verse 1, “Then He spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart” (Luke 18:1).

The other point Jesus wanted them to understand is that ultimate justice for Christians would not come about until His second coming. In Luke 18:6-7 we read, “Then the Lord said, ‘Hear what the unjust judge said. And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them?’” The Phillips Translation reads, “Notice how this dishonest magistrate behaved. Do you suppose God, patient as he is, will not see justice done for his chosen, who appeal to him day and night?”

Christians must never give up praying for the Kingdom of God to be established on the earth. That is when God will bring justice and peace to the earth. We should continue to pray, even if the answer we seek is long in coming. Jesus concluded His parable by asking if He would find people of enduring faith when He returns. The point of the parable was to remind Christians that we must not lose heart (faith) no matter the circumstances and that we should continuously pray for the day Jesus Christ will return and restore God’s government on the earth.

Necessity of faith

In this month's issue of *Virtual Christian Magazine*, you will see several ways faith can be expressed. Each article illustrates faith in action, but under different circumstances. Growing in faith is an expensive endeavor. By that, I mean we must be willing to take the time and effort necessary to learn what God says to us, and then apply His Word in our daily lives. Jesus Himself said, "And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:27). We must be willing to obey Him no matter the cost to us.

It is our hope that as you read, "the eyes of your understanding" (Ephesians 1:18) will be opened so that your walk of faith will continue to mature as you learn more about the truth of God and how it applies in your life.

Letters to the Editor

[When Things God Does Just Don't Make Sense](#)



Thank you so much for this article, I have been praying for some time now about my marriage situation, and it is very clear that I need to be more patient with the answer. I had been fasting when I stumbled on this article and it really opened my eyes. Thanks again!

Some feedback messages are edited for space and/or clarity