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# The Man Who Would Be Pope

*Signs of Pope John Paul II's failing health clearly renew speculation that he may not live much longer. Who would replace him as the next leader of the Roman Catholic Church? What qualities will the cardinals look for in the man who would be pope?*

by Cecil E. Maranville

**P**raying at the shrine of Lourdes, France, a few weeks ago, 84-year-old Pope John Paul II stunned listeners with his words: “As I kneel here at the grotto of Massabielle, I realize with emotion that I have reached the end of my pilgrimage.” They drew the obvious conclusion—that the pope believes he is near the end of his life.

A Vatican spokesman was quick to deny this idea a few days later, claiming that the pontiff meant only that he had reached the shrine and was therefore at the end of his pilgrimage.

But Scottish Cardinal Keith O’Brien (who was with the pope at Lourdes) said he was deeply affected by witnessing the pope’s physical struggles to get through his official duties. Aides had to assist the pope to kneel at the grotto, and then had to catch him when he began to fall over while praying. Upon returning to Edinburgh, O’Brien asked Catholics to pray for the pope’s health.

Cardinal Godfried Danneels of Belgium (often mentioned as a possible successor to John Paul) was more blunt. “The pope is seriously weakened. When [he] says, ‘I end my pilgrimage here,’ [that could be understood as] his farewell to Lourdes and maybe to his life” (“Cardinal Hears Farewell in John Paul’s Remarks,” *The*



*Pope John Paul II on his pilgrimage to Lourdes, France, Aug. 15 (Reuters/Georges Bartoli)*

*International Herald Tribune*, Aug. 17, 2004).

The Vatican did not comment on Danneels’ assessment, although it likely did not appreciate them. No stranger to outspoken comments, Danneels angered the Vatican a few years ago by suggesting that the pope might step down due to his health.

John Paul suffers from severe arthritis in one knee that prevents him from walking. But it appears that the

(See “POPE,” page 3)



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"Whom heaven must receive until the times of

# Restoration

of all things ... ACTS 3:21

## Memorials to Peace, Not War

In my town, Indianapolis, Indiana, the centerpiece of the city is a monument to the soldiers of three conflicts in the 19th century. The Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument is a beautiful, ornate, German-designed structure, the first one, it is said, to honor the common soldier. This memorial is only one of many in our city. In fact, Indianapolis boasts more war memorials than any other American city outside of Washington, D.C.

All over the world towns of all sizes hold some type of monument to their dead from wars past. I have seen them in tiny Czech, Italian and French villages on some of my travels. I have seen a picture of my own great-grandfathers, veterans of the American Civil War, standing in front of a newly dedicated war memorial in their hometown in Georgia. It is good that people remember those who died in war. It would be even better if nations would learn the lessons that can prevent conflict from igniting into larger wars, consuming millions of lives.

I have never counted, but I think it is safe to say that war memorials outnumber memorials to peace. One of the most famous peace statues stands outside the United Nations building in New York City. It depicts the millennial scene from Isaiah 2:4 with a man beating his sword of war into a plowshare of peace. Most would agree, what a wonderful world that would be!

In America we have two days set aside each year to remember the human cost of all our wars. Veterans Day on Nov. 11 springs from the day the Great War, World War I, came to a close. Memorial Day each May remembers the fallen from all the wars. Other countries have set aside days to remember fallen soldiers. But how many days on our calendar actually commemorate and raise a memorial to peace?

God shows us in His Word, the Bible, several days set aside to teach, honor and show the way to peace among all the families of the earth. Leviticus 23:2 calls them "the feasts of the LORD." Seven annual festivals are listed in this chapter with seven "holy convocations," or Holy Days, when the people of God are to assemble and worship.

These little-understood days are the only ones mentioned in the Bible as days to be kept by the faithful who seek to support the Prince of Peace—Jesus Christ (Isaiah 9:6). (Christmas and Easter, while commonly assumed to be biblical holidays, aren't part of the Holy Days God commanded.) When properly understood in the context of all Scripture, the biblical Holy Days show the way to true and lasting peace.

As you read these words, many thousands of people in all parts of the world are focusing on the true worship of God on these days. The biblical Feast of Trumpets, Day of Atonement, Feast of Tabernacles and Last Great Day are rich with meaning about key events yet ahead in the world. A full explanation of these days is available in our free booklet, *God's Holy Day Plan—The Promise of Hope for All Mankind*.

These Holy Days herald a time of peace at the return of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace. They give a vision of hope for a time when the source of evil will be banished and the way to peace among nations will be taught. Their message shows the depth of the love of God, and the opportunity all will have to accept the saving grace of Christ. As the subject of one of this month's articles says, we need to pray, "Thy kingdom come."

You need to understand the days God commands the entire world to observe as memorials to the way of life taught in the Scriptures. They are the days that show the sequence of events in God's master plan for restoring all things through Jesus Christ. And when that occurs, it will indeed be a wonderful day!

—Darris McNeely

“POPE,” (Continued from page 1)

Parkinson’s disease from which he also suffers has advanced to the point that it makes him too unstable to walk even if he didn’t have the arthritis. And he has had numerous intestinal complaints, stemming from two abdominal gunshot wounds in 1981, a large tumor removed in the early 1990s and, perhaps, from Parkinson’s.

Speculation surfaces periodically that John Paul may not have long to live. But his comments and evident weakness when in Lourdes fanned the rumors anew.

### What happens when a pope dies?

Every pope has the equivalent of a chief of staff, called the camerlengo. When a pope dies, the camerlengo must first certify that he is indeed dead. The ritual tradition is to strike him on the forehead with a silver hammer, calling his baptismal name three times. An alternative is to place a cloth over his mouth. If he does not respond, the camerlengo declares him dead, authorizes a death certificate and then seals the papal living and working apartments.

Later, the silver hammer will be used to scratch and break the papal ring and seal, so no documents can be forged in his name.

All cardinals will hasten to Rome to undertake the administration of the interregnum, the period between popes. The only governing they do is attending to administrative matters, overseeing funeral arrangements for the deceased pope and electing his successor.

In times past, outsiders pressured the cardinals to choose a pope to suit one faction or another. Wars were even fought between different blocs, delaying the selection of a pope for years in some cases. Three years after the death of Pope Clement IV in 1268, the cardinals still had not chosen a successor. Civil officials grew tired of waiting and locked the cardinals in their meeting place, tearing the roof off the building to expose the cardinals to the elements! Not surprisingly, they chose a new pope almost immediately!

That was Pope Gregory, who estab-

lished a rule in 1274 that cardinals thenceforth were to be locked in with a key to avoid outside influence. The name of the process is a conclave, from the Latin *com* and *clavis* for, “with a key.”

Today’s conclave is very similar to what Gregory established. It is held in extreme secrecy in the Sistine Chapel in Rome. Before the meetings begin, the chapel is swept several times for electronic eavesdropping devices—something the church did not have to worry about in the 13th century. When assured of privacy, the cardinals are locked into the chapel and the doors are sealed inside and out with keys and ribbons. Every participant takes a vow of complete secrecy.

### The balloting

The cardinals select three of their number to fill the role of scrutineers for every ballot. Everyone receives a piece of paper with *Eligo in Summum Pontificem* (Latin for “I select as Supreme Pontiff”) printed on it. He writes his choice in disguised handwriting and folds the ballot over twice. Each then walks with his ballot, holding it high in the air, to where the scrutineers are seated. He places it on a plate and then tips the plate into a chalice, so all can see what he is doing.

After each vote, the scrutineers count the folded ballots to make sure they match the number of cardinals. (Only cardinals under the age of 80 at the time the pope dies are eligible to vote.) If the numbers don’t match, the ballots are burned and not counted.

If they match, the first scrutineer takes them one by one and marks down the name. The second scrutineer does the same, creating a duplicate record. The third scrutineer pierces the “Eligo” on the counted ballot with a needle and thread, adding all ballots to a long string to ensure that they aren’t accidentally counted more than once.

A two-thirds majority is necessary to elect a pope. If the vote is unsuccessful, all ballots and the string are burned in a stove with some chemical pellets that produce black smoke. The black smoke puffing from the chimney tells the world that there is no pope yet.

A second ballot is taken immediate-

ly. A third is taken in the afternoon or perhaps the next day. John Paul established a rule that allows the cardinals to choose a pope by simple majority if they haven’t agreed upon one after 12 or 13 days.

When someone is chosen, he is approached and asked in Latin if he accepts. If he answers yes, he is asked by what name he wishes to be called. That



Reuters/Ansa

*The Vatican promoted Dionigi Tettamanzi to archbishop of Milan in 2002, which is tantamount to receiving a party nomination in Western political terms.*

follows a custom begun in 533 when a cardinal named Mercury was chosen as pope. The church did not think it appropriate for their leader to have the name of a pagan deity, so Mercury changed his name to honor a previous pope. Modern popes all do the same.

The successful ballot is burned with pellets that emit a white smoke, indicating that the church has a new leader. He is fitted with papal robes (several sizes are on hand) and immediately introduced to the waiting crowd in St. Peter’s square.

The most important question about this subject is, who might be the next pope?

### Looking for a man to be the pope

Vatican watchers coined the Italian term *papabile* (plural: *papabili*) to mean a cardinal who is a likely candidate for pope. The word *candidate* is perhaps misleading, for no one pro-

notes himself for the office, and there are no nominations by interest blocs. Indeed it is against Catholic law for the cardinals to campaign!

But there is plenty of “unofficial” politicking. Technically, any male baptized Catholic is eligible to be chosen as pope, but for centuries, the cardinals have chosen one of their own. Cardinals interested in the position of pope make themselves available for special events or projects. Those who are known to be somewhat outspoken tone down their rhetoric. Those who are known to avoid the spotlight step into it a little.

Currently, some of the most often mentioned papal “possibles” are: Claudio Hummes, Brazil, age 69; Jorge Mario Bergoglio, Argentina, 66; Godfried Danneels, Belgium, 70; Francis Arinze, Nigeria, 71; Ivan Dias, India, 68; Walter Kasper, Germany, 71; Norberto Rivera Carrera, Mexico, 62; Oscar Rodriguez Maradiaga, Honduras, 61; Christoph Schönborn, Austria, 59; Dionigi Tettamanzi, Italy, 70; Giovanni Battista Re, Italy, 70; and Lubomyr Husar, Ukraine, 71.

The ability to speak many languages, including Italian, Latin and English, is a must. All of these men are multilingual.

Of course, the pope has to be above reproach, which may eliminate Rodriguez Maradiaga from the outset. He reportedly moved a pedophile priest from country to country to avoid prosecution and defiantly told the press: “I’d be prepared to go to jail rather than harm one of my priests” (“Report: ‘Papal Successor’ Moved Pedophile Priest,” *The Irish Examiner*, June 21, 2004).

The cardinals will look for a man to be conservative, as John Paul has been—but maybe not quite so conservative. Tettamanzi is perhaps the most conservative of the *papabili*—some say to the point of being somewhat dull. The Vatican recently promoted him archbishop of Milan, which is tantamount to receiving a party nomination in Western political terms. To show he is a regular guy, he took a spin recently in a Formula One race car.

In this modern age, a pope must look good on television and in photographs. He must also be somewhat charismatic. Husar may not fit this marker, for he

looks like a tribal patriarch of past centuries with his long uneven white beard and plain glasses.

The conventional wisdom is that they will select an older man, for a reign as long as John Paul’s allows one man to have too much influence on the church. As it is, John Paul has appointed 95 percent of the voting cardinals, each hand-picked with an eye on continuing his views and interests.

### The challenges of the present world

Pope John Paul II has been a strong supporter and promoter of “one Christian Europe, from the Urals to the Atlantic.” But the influence of the church is waning in Europe, which rejected any mention of its Christian roots in the EU Constitution—ignoring the appeal of the pope to include this acknowledgement.

France, called “the first daughter of the church” by John Paul on his first papal visit there, actually led the move to exclude any mention of Christianity. France is so non-Catholic that it is considered a mission field by the church!

One bright star for the Catholics is Poland. Polish seminaries are full and within a few years, one in three European priests will be Polish.

So, a priority for a new pope will be to strengthen the church’s presence and influence in Europe. Several *papabili* are European.

Prophecy shows that in the end time, a worldwide religious system will work closely with the political “beast” power. That symbiotic relationship will propel the “false prophet” to an unparalleled position of worldwide power. For more information, please request our free booklet *The Book of Revelation Unveiled*.

A new pope needs to be able to confront radical Islam and work with Muslims who are peaceful. Both the present crisis of radical Islamic terrorism and the reality of the mammoth size of the Muslim faith demand this. In 2000, 20 percent of the world’s population was Muslim (about 1.19 billion) and their numbers grow at an annual rate of 2.13 percent. By contrast, approximately 1.06 billion were Roman Catholic, whose growth rate is 1.29 per-

cent. Every 24 hours, there are 68,000 more Muslims and 37,000 more Roman Catholics (David A. Barrett, *World Christian Encyclopedia*, p. 5).

The new pope also needs to represent Africa, one of the most conservative, as well as one of the fastest growing, Catholic regions in the world. There are over 100 million African Catholics, about 10 percent of the church’s worldwide membership.

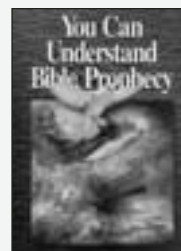
One *papabile* stands out in this regard, Francis Arinze of Nigeria. A black man, he was baptized by a black man who later became Nigeria’s first candidate for Catholic sainthood. Arinze led the Vatican’s office for interreligious affairs for decades and has a strong record of confronting radical Islam and works well with peaceful Muslims.

A black pope baptized by a black saint would be a bold stroke, perhaps too bold for a tradition-bound church. “White smoke for a black pope” is the catchphrase going around. But there is another proverb associated with the conclave: “Enter a pope, come out a cardinal,” meaning those who seem likely candidates often are not chosen as pope.

Bible prophecy tells of an end-time church that has a seemingly Christlike appearance, but the voice of a different spirit. The enigmatic prophecies of the abomination of desolation and of one who sits in the temple and claims he is God also both relate to this developing story. You can read what the Bible says about them in our booklets *You Can Understand Bible Prophecy* and *The Middle East in Bible Prophecy*. ❖

### Recommended Reading

To help you better understand the overview of prophecy, we have prepared several booklets. Please request *The Book of Revelation Unveiled*, *The Middle East in Bible Prophecy* and *You Can Understand Bible Prophecy*.



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# What Signs Are You Waiting For?

*Throughout history humans have been looking for visible and supernatural signs to convince them of God's involvement in human affairs. The Bible foretells some amazing celestial signs that will come just before God's final day of wrath is unleashed. But there's no need to wait for those heavenly signs!*

by Mike Bennett

**H**ow many atheists and agnostics have asked why an all-powerful God wouldn't make Himself known with an unmistakable miracle? How many Christians have also wished for a miraculous sign to strengthen their faith?

Jesus Christ told His disciples that awesome, supernatural signs are in our future. But the Bible shows that God much prefers that we get the point without such drastic measures.

## Seeking a sign

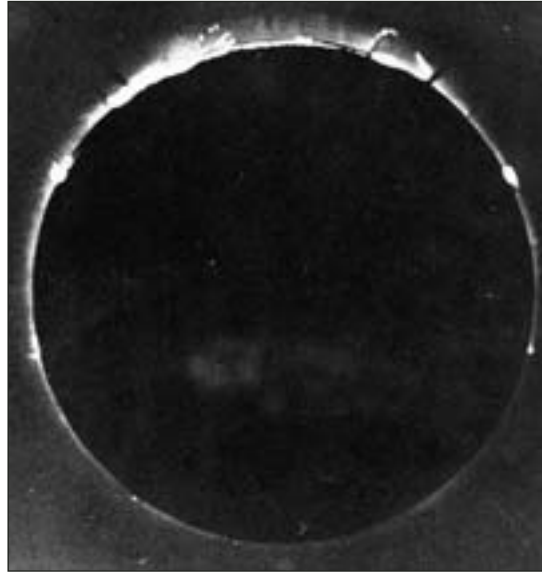
In Matthew 24 Jesus Christ answered His disciples' question, "What will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?" (verse 3). In this pivotal prophecy He outlined the trends and events that would occur from that day to the time of His return to establish His Kingdom.

Interestingly, when He first mentions supernatural signs in this chapter, Christ warns His chosen people not to be deceived. "For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect" (Matthew 24:24). Contrary to popular belief, miraculous signs are not always proof of God's involvement. God has allowed Satan and his human instruments to use the supernatural to mislead people—for now.

It's also interesting to note that the religious leaders of Christ's day had asked Him earlier for a sign. To His own generation, Jesus said the only sign He would give was the sign of the prophet Jonah.

"Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered, saying, 'Teacher, we want to see a sign from You.' But He answered and said to them, '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 12:38-40).

Though He gave this miraculous sign of His resurrection, most people then did not believe. And few today seem to believe that His resur-



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*Modern man has calculated the eclipses and no longer fears them. What would it take to get people's attention today?*

rection actually occurred after three days and three nights as He said it would. So even that one sign has been disbelieved and ignored.

## Heavenly signs

But back in the Olivet Prophecy in Matthew 24, we read that Jesus did give some important end-time signs: "Immediately after the tribulation [the unprecedented time of trouble described earlier in the chapter] of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken" (verse 29).

The apostle John expanded on this theme of heavenly signs under the inspiration of Jesus Christ. Revelation 6:12-17 records the sixth seal (see our booklet *Are We Living in the Time of the End?* to see more parallels between Matthew 24 and Revelation 6).

"I looked when He opened the sixth seal, and behold, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon

*God is a God of love, and He is sending a warning to this world about what is to come. But, sadly, most won't heed now, and so God has planned for additional, supernatural signs to warn this world yet again—the heavenly signs in the sun, moon and stars.*



*Through the ages mankind has been fascinated by the heavenly bodies, sometimes worshipping them, sometimes reading portents in them. Unusual events such as eclipses and comets sparked fear and were seen as signs of impending disasters.*

became like blood. And the stars of heaven fell to the earth, as a fig tree drops its late figs when it is shaken by a mighty wind. Then the sky receded as a scroll when it is rolled up, and every mountain and island was moved out of its place.

“And the kings of the earth, the great men, the rich men, the commanders, the mighty men, every slave and every free man, hid themselves in the caves and in the rocks of the mountains, and said to the mountains and rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of His wrath has come, and who is able to stand?’” (Revelation 6:12-17).

Through the ages mankind has been fascinated by the heavenly bodies, sometimes worshipping them, sometimes reading portents in them. Unusual events such as eclipses and comets sparked fear and were seen as signs of impending disasters.

But modern man has mapped the heavens and calculated the eclipses and orbits of comets. What would it take to get people’s attention today? Likely it will take the awesome spectacles Christ foretold. The heavenly signs He mentioned will be clearly supernatural, and they will fulfill numerous prophecies of the Old Testament.

### **A brief survey of heavenly signs**

Jesus’ description of a darkened sun and moon, falling stars and the heavens being shaken would have struck a chord in the minds of His audience. So would John’s record, which included the element of an earthquake. Such events were described many times throughout the Old Testament in connection with the time called the Day of the Lord.

Isaiah’s vivid imagery also talks about people hiding in the rocks “from the terror of the LORD” (Isaiah 2:10). Verses 11 and 12 go on to show part of the reason God will intervene in this

way: “The lofty looks of man shall be humbled, the haughtiness of men shall be bowed down. And the LORD alone shall be exalted in that day. For the day of the LORD of hosts shall come upon everything proud and lofty, upon everything lifted up—and it shall be brought low.”

Human pride has always been a stumbling block to the incredible relationship God offers us—to be His children. Pride destroys our other relationships as well, leading to untold suffering and heartache. But seemingly the only way to break through a hardened shell of pride is to shake things up a bit. So that is what God will do.

In the midst of this traumatic time, people will finally see the worthlessness of their idols, which they will throw to “the moles and bats” (Isaiah 2:20). While this includes actual idols, charms and religious objects, the apostle Paul equates idolatry with our modern pastime of greed and covetousness (Colossians 3:5). Our cars, entertainment centers and other toys can be the focus of our attention and affections today, as much as a household god would be in a different society. Finally the greedy desire for more and more things will be seen for the pointless goal that it is.

Isaiah addresses the Day of the Lord again in Isaiah 13:9-11, this time tied in to the darkening of the stars, sun and moon.

Ezekiel also describes heavenly signs in his prophecy and lamentation for pharaoh and Egypt (Ezekiel 32:7-8). The darkness mentioned here is reminiscent of the ninth plague brought on Egypt at the time of the Exodus. And in the end times it seems darkness will also play a part in softening up the hard hearts of a world too long under Satan’s sway.

Joel also pinpoints the time of these heavenly signs: “The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the coming of the great and awesome day of the LORD” (Joel 2:31).

Haggai 2:6 reveals that God will once more “shake heaven and earth.” The Nelson Study Bible says that this is “another way of speaking of the day of the Lord. The purpose of the day of the Lord is to prepare the earth for the glo-

rious reign of Jesus Christ on earth.”

### Why a wrathful Lamb?

So why will God send the heavenly signs? Their purpose is to prepare for Christ’s return and His Kingdom. Our loving God must wake this world up and expose its evils, including pride, idolatry and greed, to bring this world to repentance.

But still it can seem shocking to hear about “the *wrath* of the Lamb” (Revelation 6:16). The word picture produces a stark contrast—it’s hard to imagine a cuddly lamb as angry. Why is our loving Savior described as coming in wrath?

Part of the answer is seen a few verses earlier, in the opening of the fifth seal. Here saints who have been martyred just because they served God are pictured as crying out to God. “How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” (Revelation 6:10).

God’s anger is righteous and controlled, and it is totally justified. Even



*Supernatural signs in the sun and the moon will precede the Day of the Lord*

His anger is motivated by love! This world is destroying itself with perverted thinking and depraved actions.

Christ compared the end time with the time of Noah (Matthew 24:37-39). In Noah’s day humanity had descended to the depths of evil that worsened from generation to generation. “Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man

was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart” (Genesis 6:5-6).

God is grieved at all times to see those He created to be His sons and daughters destroying themselves. But at key times and places in history His grief and righteous anger—and His controlled power and endless love—demand action. The God who created humanity and who can bring us back to life expresses tough love when that is all that will get through to us. He did it with the world of Noah’s day and with the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. And He will do it again in these last days.

Why does God hate sin so much? It goes against everything He stands for, and it has brought every evil and suffering on the world. When God’s ways are practiced, the world will know true peace and happiness. All tears will be wiped away and all sorrow will be com-

*(See “HEAVENLY SIGNS,” page 13)*

## The Heavenly Signs in the Sequence of End-Time Events

Christ said, “Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken” (Matthew 24:29).

Notice, in the concluding description of the sixth seal, what is to follow the heavenly signs: “And the kings of the earth, the great men, the rich men, the commanders, the mighty men, every slave and every free man, hid themselves in the caves and in the rocks of the mountains, and said to the mountains and rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of His wrath has come, and who is able to stand?’” (Revelation 6:15-17; compare Zephaniah 1:14-17).

Note the order of these three separate events: First comes the tribulation, as described in the fifth seal. Next the heavenly signs, described in the sixth seal, occur. After the heavenly signs is the Day of the Lord, the day of God’s wrath.

The heavenly signs occur after the time of tribulation has begun but before the Day of the Lord begins. The prophet Joel confirms this: “And I will show wonders in the heavens and in the earth: blood and fire and pillars of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the coming of the great and awesome day of the LORD” (Joel 2:30-31).

Why is this so significant?

Satan’s vindictive rampage of terror will be launched against

the descendants of the tribes of Israel and the people who live among them, as well as the converted servants of Christ before the heavenly signs announce the Day of the Lord.

This means that Satan’s wrath—the time when great tribulation will fall on God’s people—will have been underway for some time before the beginning of God’s wrath. Even after the time of God’s wrath—the Day of the Lord—Satan’s destructive war on God’s people apparently will not cease until he is bound at Jesus’ return (Revelation 20:1-2).

Notice that the woman of chapter 12 will be “nourished for a time and times and half a time [a year, years and half a year], from the presence of the serpent” (verse 14). Even though God will nourish, strengthen and protect some of His people during that terrible time, many others will be killed.

Revelation 11:2 tells us that Jerusalem is to be trampled underfoot by gentiles for 42 months (Revelation 11:2). God also promises to raise up two prophets to be His witnesses for 1,260 days (verse 3).

That each of these periods equals 3½ years appears to be significant. These references indicate that a total of 3½ years elapses from the beginning of Satan’s attack on the people of God until his political and religious systems are destroyed and he is locked away at Christ’s return.

Source: *The Book of Revelation Unveiled*, [www.ucg.org/booklets](http://www.ucg.org/booklets).

# U.S. Troop Withdrawals— What Do They Mean?

*President George W. Bush has announced significant U.S. troop withdrawals from Germany, Japan and South Korea. What's behind this development and what will it mean a few years from now?*

by Melvin Rhodes

I first heard the news of U.S. troop withdrawals on Lufthansa, the German national airline. The plane was en route from Accra, Ghana, to Frankfurt, Germany, the country most affected by the announcement. After the plane had taken off, the airline showed the latest BBC world news, which I had not been able to watch while in Ghana.

I cannot say that I was surprised by the news. The United States has been showing all the signs of classic imperial overreach for some time. Prior to 9/11 the United States had massive troop commitments around the world, all maintained without a draft. Following the events of Sept. 11, two wars have only added to the burden—there are simply not enough troops to handle all the commitments and not enough money either.

A day after leaving Ghana, I visited Buckingham Palace, official home of Queen Elizabeth II in the heart of London. I had taken seven American young adults to Ghana with me to help with our annual United Church of God teen summer camp. All had requested a few days in London on the way home.

Amidst the splendor of the palace I reflected on Britain's past glory and, more specifically, on the country's rapid decline from imperial power. I was born shortly before the queen's reign began. At the time of her accession to the throne, Britain's military was more than four times what it is today. In 1952, the British Empire was largely intact. Britain had bases all over the globe—among the largest were Singapore and Malta, neither of which has a single British soldier on its soil today.

Throughout the 1960s British imperial power was in retreat. Britain was withdrawing its troops from different parts of the world and British power and influence was diminishing as the troops withdrew. Finally, towards the end of the '60s, Britain announced its withdrawal from "east of

Suez"—all troops east of the Suez Canal were to be brought home.

What was remarkable about these withdrawals was that they were, in the main, voluntary. Many of the countries in which Britain had troops wanted the British to continue their military presence. But the British had serious financial problems and needed to cut back on their military spending. This was the age of expensive social programs and there just wasn't the money for massive defense outlay and support for single mothers or destitute asylum seekers from Third World countries.

Added to the financial burden, London had abolished conscription in 1959, meaning there were fewer men to send overseas. Besides, the 1956 Suez crisis had shown that the United Kingdom could do nothing without U.S. support and America seemed content to take over the British role of international policeman.

Now America finds itself in a similar situation—too many commitments and not enough troops or money.

## **Reaction to the U.S. announcement**

The American-owned, Paris-based *International Herald Tribune* had this to say in its editorial column under the headline "Troop Plan Makes Little Sense":

"The U.S. troop redeployment plan announced Monday by President George W. Bush makes little long-term strategic sense. It is certain to strain crucial alliances, increase overall costs and dangerously weaken deterrence on the Korean Peninsula at the worst possible moment. Meanwhile, it will do nothing to address the military's most pressing current need: relieving the chronic strain on ground forces that has resulted from failing to anticipate the long, and largely unilateral, American occupation of Iraq . . . Overall, this plan marches in the wrong direction. Instead of reflecting and reinforcing America's core alliances, the

*Now America finds itself in a situation similar to what Britain faced in the 1950s and '60s—too many commitments and not enough troops or money.*

new plan dilutes them” (Aug. 18, 2004).

The same day, *USA Today*'s headline was “A Pullback of U.S. Forces Could Alter Ties With Allies.” The article said: “Gary Smith, executive director of the American Academy in Berlin, warns that troop reductions would mean fewer contacts between the United States and Germany, which, despite recent tensions over the war in Iraq, have been close allies for five decades. Since World War II, millions of U.S. troops and family members have rotated through Germany, fostering people-to-people relations that have helped underpin the two nations' alliance. ‘Germany and America will drift apart unless there are great efforts to collaborate,’ Smith says.”

The *International Herald Tribune* editorial also pointed out the importance of Germany to the United States. “Although it is certainly true that American troops no longer have to sit in Germany to protect Western Europe from the Red Army, many of today's battlefields, like Iraq and Afghanistan, are in fact closer to Germany than they are to the United States.”

The paper also reminds readers that Germany pays a large part of the cost of keeping U.S. troops in its country and that Americans derive indirect benefits from being stationed there: “Germany pays a hefty share of the costs for the American military bases located there . . . Furthermore, the military will also lose the advantage that comes with giving large numbers of its men and women the experience of living in other cultures.”

Interestingly, not one of the newspapers or magazines I read reminded its readers of why American troops were there in the first place. Although many mentioned the Soviet threat during the Cold War era, none looked back further in time to when the United States, the United Kingdom and their allies liberated Western Europe from Hitler's Third Reich. Having caused two world wars in one lifetime, the allies wanted to make sure that Germany would never rise again.

The same is true of Japan, which will also be impacted by troop withdrawals. The third country affected is South Korea. It has been pointed out



Reuters/Kevin L. Maize

*U.S. President George W. Bush shakes hands with veterans during a visit to the Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention in Cincinnati, Ohio, Aug. 16. In his speech he announced the withdrawal of about 70,000 troops from Europe and Asia in a major realignment of the U.S. military presence.*

that Washington has had some major disagreements with all three governments in the last two years and these withdrawals are seen by some as a punishment for this. If that is the case, Washington fails to realize that troop withdrawals will mean America will have diminishing influence over these countries.

### Money plays a role

The British *Financial Times*, on the same day as the above articles, carried an article by Martin Wolf, a regular columnist whose feature bore the headline: “America Is Now on the Comfortable Path to Ruin.”

Mr. Wolf wrote: “It takes two to tango. But there can be only one leader in the dance. In the dance of global macroeconomics, the U.S. is not leader, but led.” Macroeconomics deals with the larger units and economic forces at work in the world's economies.

Mr. Wolf then writes about America's increasing financial problems and their international impact. “Let us be blunt about it. The U.S. is now on the comfortable path to ruin. It is being driven along a road of ever ris-

ing deficits and debt that risk destroying the country's credit and the global role of its currency.”

He adds: “The longer the process continues, the bigger the ultimate shock to the dollar and levels of domestic real spending will have to be. Unless trends change, 10 years from now the U.S. will have fiscal debt and external liabilities that are both over 100% of GDP. It will have lost control over its economic fate.”

One illustration of this change in the status of the dollar and its effect on domestic spending is the rising price of oil. Although there are a number of reasons for the dramatic price increase of recent weeks, one reason “may be the weak dollar, the currency in which oil is priced. OPEC complains that the recent fall in the dollar robs it of purchasing power (since its members buy things in yen and euros we sell)” (“Unstoppable?”, *The Economist*, Aug. 21, 2004).

As with England in the 25 years after World War II, the United States will inevitably have to continue reducing its military commitments in the light of worsening financial realities. Other

superpowers have experienced similar declines in the past—before Britain, both France and Spain traveled the same road as they declined from imperial powers to normal nations with limited influence over other countries.

Without realizing it, Mr. Wolf even touches on who might best be in a position to pick up the military slack. “Japan and Germany, the world’s second and third largest economies, are also generating very large surpluses: this year, according to the latest Consensus Forecasts, they will run an aggregate current account (or savings) surplus of \$256bn.” So, while the U.S. trade deficit remains at \$600 billion per year, the next two largest economies run a surplus of almost half that figure!

A few days after the United States announced the withdrawal of 70,000 troops based overseas, the British *Sunday Express* contained a quote from the (London) Foreign Policy Centre’s Mark Leonard: “There are now 70,000 European troops deployed on every continent.” The Aug. 22 *Sunday Express* article was not about U.S. troop reductions. Titled “Blair Is Demanding Too Much From Our Shrinking Forces,” the paper focused on announced reductions in British armed strength.

The article appeared just two days after a *Financial Times* poll showed that “foreign policy is now the issue of greatest concern to the [British] public, ranked far ahead of the economy” (“Iraq War Shifts Voters’ Priorities,” Aug. 20, 2004). In the wake of 9/11, “Immigration and race relations have risen high up people’s list of priorities, while unemployment has receded as a concern . . . The poll also suggests that the Iraq conflict and war on terror have catapulted foreign policy to the forefront of the public consciousness.”

We live in frightening times, on the verge of the final cataclysmic events that immediately precede the second coming of Jesus Christ and the establishment of the Kingdom of God.

### **A prophetic warning to the American and British peoples**

It’s difficult to remember it now, but less than 60 years ago, at the end of World War II, the United States and the British Empire seemed invincible. They

had triumphed over the greatest threat to world peace and freedom that the world had ever seen.

Six decades later we can see that the theme of the last 60 years has been the gradual decline of these nations. God has withdrawn His blessings from them as they have progressively turned away from Him and His laws.

This is exactly as God said it would be when He promised financial and military supremacy as a reward for obedience but the opposite as a consequence of sin. The Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, chapter 28, highlights this very well.

“Now it shall come to pass, if you diligently obey the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all His

*Unless our English-speaking nations repent and turn back to God, you can continue to watch the financial and military decline of the two great English-speaking nations. At the same time, you will see the rise of others who will fill the gap, fulfilling biblical prophecies written thousands of years ago.*

commandments which I command you today, that the LORD your God will set you high above all nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, because you obey the voice of the LORD your God . . . Then all peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of the LORD, and they shall be afraid of you . . . And the LORD will make you the head and not the tail; you shall be above only, and not be beneath, if you heed the commandments of the LORD your God” (Deuteronomy 28:1-2, 10, 13).

The consequences of disobedience are also listed: “But it shall come to pass, if you do not obey the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all His commandments and His statutes which I command you today, that all

these curses will come upon you and overtake you . . . The LORD will cause you to be defeated before your enemies . . . The alien who is among you shall rise higher and higher above you . . . He shall lend to you, but you shall not lend to him; he shall be the head, and you shall be the tail” (Deuteronomy 28:15, 25, 43-44).

The head and the tail refer to economics. When America was a creditor country, it was the undisputed head. Now it is the biggest debtor nation in the world. Up to this point, the world has been content to lend the United States money, though this has partly been done through the purchase by foreign companies of U.S. assets (factories, businesses, etc). At some point, these other nations will assert their control—they will be the head and the United States will be the tail.

Perhaps that time has arrived. As Mr. Wolf put it in the *Financial Times*, “In the dance of global macroeconomics, the U.S. is not leader, but led.” How ironic that the two greatest creditor nations mentioned in the *Financial Times* article are Japan and Germany, the two nations the United States and Britain defeated in World War II. What a turnaround!

Unless our English-speaking nations repent and turn back to God, you can continue to watch the financial and military decline of the two great English-speaking nations. At the same time, you will see the rise of others who will fill the gap, fulfilling biblical prophecies written thousands of years ago. ❖

## **Recommended Reading**

What is ahead of us now? What does the Bible say about the future for nations like the United States and Britain? We offer a well-researched booklet that can help. Request *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy*. It is free of charge.



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# ‘Thy Kingdom Come’

*Jesus Christ instructed His followers to pray, “Thy kingdom come” (King James Version). In its long-term effects this prayer is the most important request a person could make—asking God the Father that His Kingdom would become a reality. Three of Christ’s disciples were given a special preview of the Kingdom of God commonly known as the transfiguration. What does it mean for true Christians today?*

by John Ross Schroeder

**B**efore and after Christ’s death, His disciples expected the Kingdom to come during their lifetimes. Only the passage of time convinced them otherwise. He even gave them a parable to try to dissuade them from their expectations. “Now as they heard these things, He spoke another parable, because He was near Jerusalem and because *they thought the kingdom of God would appear immediately*” (Luke 19:11, emphasis added throughout).

Every generation of Christ’s true followers has experienced the same expectations the apostles did. At least some in each generation thought that the Kingdom would come in their lifetimes. Certainly if you had lived in 14th century Europe when one third of the population died of the black death, you could have been forgiven for thinking that Christ would have returned to this earth at that time. There is nothing wrong with holding on to this hope. The last generation of Christians who live to see Christ’s return will finally be right!

## Previews of coming attractions

A longtime ingredient of going to the movies or cinema has been the showing of several brief previews of feature films to be shown at a later date. The transfiguration of Jesus Christ was, in a sense, a short preview of what is coming to this globe—the glorious Kingdom of God. Peter, James and John were the only disciples privileged to witness and to experience this unique preview.

These three didn’t grasp the perils ahead of them in their ministry. James, the brother of John, would be martyred early and Peter would follow in his steps some 30 years later, after enduring many difficult trials of his faith. John would live to see the Church greatly shaken, as many brethren were taken in by forerunners of the insidious doctrines of Gnosticism and at least one prominent leader took over a congregation—putting out the true members. Some of these troubles continue even in our day.

They would need special encouragement to

endure these and other trials to the end of their lives. So Jesus Christ was transfigured before them in a dramatic representation of His second coming and the Kingdom He will bring at that time. Christ warns us all that “whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of Man also will be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels” (Mark 8:38).

But immediately after speaking of His second coming, Christ stated: “Assuredly, I say to you that there are some standing here who will not taste death till they see the kingdom of God present with power.” Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James and John and led them up on a high mountain apart by themselves; and *He was transfigured before them*” (Mark 9:1-2).

The original Greek word for *transfigured* is *metamorphousthai*. It occurs only four times in the New Testament and in the vernacular simply means, “assumed a different form.” This Greek term implies change. We are familiar with the similar English word *metamorphosis* and know what that means.

## Describing the transfiguration

Continue Mark’s account: “His clothes became shining, exceedingly white, like snow, such as no launderer on earth can whiten them” (verse 3). Some among our readers may remember the old detergent ads on TV promising our clothes would be “whiter than white” if we would only use a particular product. The transfiguration really was whiter than white—purer than the driven snow, “as white as the light,” as Matthew’s parallel account adds.

Matthew’s Gospel also reveals something else exceedingly important about the transfiguration. “*His face shone like the sun*” (Matthew 17:2). John would later see Christ in a vision and describe His facial appearance “like the sun shining in its strength” (Revelation 1:16).

Other biblical passages tell us that this is the

*In the vision called the transfiguration, Jesus appeared with Moses and Elijah as they will appear when the Kingdom of God is established on earth at Christ’s return.*

ultimate potential of every true Christian—those who have God’s Holy Spirit within them (Romans 8:9). The prophet Daniel confirms that “those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament. And those who turn many to *righteousness* [keeping God’s commandments, Psalm 119:172] like the stars forever and ever” (Daniel 12:3; compare 1 Corinthians 15:41-43).

Jesus Christ adds: “*Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father.* He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (Matthew 13:43). It takes spiritual insight to truly grasp the real meaning of these passages. Humanly, this knowledge is beyond our five senses. The world simply cannot understand these things and it does not believe what the Bible says about them. Only those who have the Holy Spirit can truly comprehend spiritual matters.

### Moses and Elijah

The next verse in Mark’s account introduces two great Hebrew prophets into the story. “And Elijah appeared to them with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus” (Mark 9:4). It is very important to read all three synoptic Gospel accounts of the transfiguration. Luke reveals two more vital bits of knowledge about Moses and Elijah.

“And behold two men talked with Him [Jesus], who were Moses and Elijah, *who appeared in glory* and spoke of His decease which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem” (Luke 9:30-31). Even though the vision was of the far future, these beings spoke about the sacrifice of Christ for the forgiveness of our sins. The conversation underscores the eternal significance of Christ’s death!

Both Moses and Elijah appeared “in glory” just like Jesus did. It showed what they will look like in the Kingdom of God. Remember what was said about Jesus as a man, even though He was God in the flesh. “The Holy Spirit was not yet given, because *Jesus was not yet glorified*” (John 7:39). Later just before His crucifixion He asked God the Father, “And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was” (John 17:5). (To understand the significance of this passage, please request our free booklet *Who Is God?*)

The Father answered this prayer when He raised Christ from the dead. *After* His resurrection Jesus told His disciples: “Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?” (Luke 24:26.) True Christians also have this glorious destiny as the apostle Paul explained: “For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body” (Philippians 3:20-21; compare 1 Corinthians 15:44-49). This will occur at the second coming of Jesus Christ.

### The significance of the tabernacles

Pick up the story again in Mark’s account: “Then Peter answered and said to Jesus, ‘Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; and let us make three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses and one for Elijah’—because he did not know what to say, for they were greatly afraid” (Mark 9:5).

Fear was the natural, understandable reaction of the righteous patriarchs, prophets and apostles when they got very close to the glorious realm of God. It is a dimension completely foreign to our normal experience as human beings. It took Ezekiel a good while to recover from his first encounter with God’s glory.

Peter did not realize what he was saying (Luke 9:33), but God may have guided his seemingly unconnected suggestion. A tabernacle is a dwelling place and one of God’s commanded festivals is the Feast of Tabernacles. The *ultimate* meaning of this Christian observance involves the continual presence of transformed men and women in the Kingdom of God. They will be with Jesus Christ as He rules on earth for 1,000 years (Revelation 5:10; 20:4-6) followed by the Great White Throne Judgment period. Then on beyond, they will spend eternity dwelling with the Father and the Son. The New Jerusalem, the City of God, will come down to the earth from heaven (Revelation 3:12; 21:2).

“Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men [mankind, gender inclusive], and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God [the Father] Himself will be with them and be their God” (Revelation 21:3). This city will need no temple

because “the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb [Christ] are its temple” (verse 22).

### A voice from heaven

Continue with Mark: “And a cloud came and overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, saying ‘This is My beloved Son. Hear Him!’” (verse 7). The Father was confirming the deity of Christ and His ministry to the chief disciples.

The apostle Peter never forgot this incredible experience. “For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we [Peter, James and John] made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were *eyewitnesses of His majesty*. For He received from God the Father honor and glory when such a voice came to Him from the Excellent Glory: ‘This is My beloved Son . . .’ And we heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain. And so we have the prophetic word confirmed” (2 Peter 1:16-19).

None of the transfiguration accounts say that the Father actually spoke these words Himself. They all refer to “a voice.” Christ had clearly stated: “And the Father Himself, who sent Me, has testified of Me. You have neither heard His voice at any time, nor seen His form” (John 5:37). We can only surmise that it was an angelic voice speaking directly on behalf of the Father, repeating His words verbatim.

We conclude the story itself with Matthew’s account. “Now as they came down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them saying, *Tell the vision* to no one until the Son of Man is risen from the dead” (Matthew 17:9). Note that it was a vision, that is, not real. Some mistakenly point to these accounts to prove that Moses and Elijah were in heaven. They overlook Christ’s explanation, that what the disciples saw was only a vision.

Although this was only a prophetic vision of the coming Kingdom of God (not yet the full reality), it was still a very real experience. Peter, James and John walked through all the circumstances and actually heard a voice from heaven. They both saw and heard something from another dimension.

### Partakers of the divine nature

We human beings have to bridge the gap between our humanity and the

Kingdom of God. Becoming converted by receiving the Holy Spirit is the only way to accomplish this—the only method to possessing everlasting life in the Kingdom. The apostle Peter told His listeners (and us today) to repent and be baptized and then they would receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:37-39).

When that actually occurs, Jesus' encouraging words in John 5:24 can be fulfilled. "Most assuredly I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him [the Father] who sent Me *has everlasting life*, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life."

Possessing the Holy Spirit is our assurance of eternal life in a spirit body to come. For, "Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Corinthians 15:50). Our fleshly bodies must be transformed. (To understand more fully, please request our two free booklets *The Road to Eternal Life* and *Transforming Your Life*.)

Clearly a transformation takes place when we are truly converted during this human life. Peter also said: "*Repent therefore and be converted*, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord" (Acts 3:19). Again, when that happens and we are duly baptized (Mark 16:16), we have a very strong assurance of eternal life in the Kingdom of God. The apostle John wrote: "And this is the testimony: that God has given us [Christians] eternal life, and this life is in His Son. *He who has the Son has life*" (1 John 5:11-12).

It's something like when a woman conceives and becomes pregnant. Given normal circumstances and a reasonably healthy pregnancy, a baby is going to be born. Sometimes, things go wrong and the baby tragically dies before birth. That can happen spiritually too. The apostle Paul said that he disciplined his body lest after having preached to others, he should become a castaway (1 Corinthians 9:27). But that didn't happen to him and it won't happen to us if we are truly converted and follow the biblical rules. God the Father and our High Priest Jesus Christ are always there to help us over the rough spots!

Gradually we grow in the grace and the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18) and become "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). A healthy spiritual diet of prayer and Bible study is essential! ❖

**"HEAVENLY SIGNS,"** (Continued from page 7)  
forted. Sin and its evil effects must be banished forever.

### The great innumerable multitude

The Bible describes horrendous times ahead as the Great Tribulation, heavenly signs and the Day of the Lord come upon this world (see "The Heavenly Signs in the Sequence of End-Time Events," page 7, for more on the time order of these events).

God is a God of love, and He is sending a warning to this world about what is to come. But, sadly, most won't heed now, and so God has planned for additional, supernatural signs to warn this world yet again—the heavenly signs in

*We don't have to wait for the heavenly signs. Jesus Christ reveals the broad outline of prophetic events now, and encourages us to discern the signs of the times and to watch and pray always.*

the sun, moon and stars.

Revelation 7 shows that God will call and convert many even during the Great Tribulation. A great, innumerable multitude is described as "the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (Revelation 7:14).

Nearly 50 years ago a faithful minister wrote about this innumerable multitude and about the heavenly signs. The message remains poignant for us today:

"After the Great Tribulation, when men are seized with stark *terror* at these supernatural heavenly signs, multiplied thousands will at last recognize that it is really God warning them! Yes, multiplied *thousands* who now hear this warning from God will not heed it now . . . They are not repenting and turning to God, *now!* Oh, how well I know that!

"But when they see these things actually occur . . . *when* they see these terrifying supernatural signs in the heavens, *then*, at last, hundreds of thousands of them—perhaps even some of *you*—will at last recognize the *truth*, and at last turn

to God in complete submission, fully repenting, and coming through Jesus Christ the Savior of the world! We of this ministry well know that our *real* reward in the harvest of precious lives will mostly come after our labors are finished!" (Herbert W. Armstrong, *The Book of Revelation Unveiled at Last!*, 1959 and 1972, p. 32).

### Don't wait for heavenly signs!

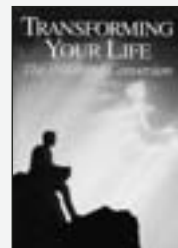
We don't have to wait for the heavenly signs. Jesus Christ reveals the broad outline of prophetic events now, and encourages us to discern the signs of the times and to watch and pray always (Matthew 16:3; Luke 21:36).

On the personal level, Paul exhorts us to act to fulfill God's law of love, "Knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light" (Romans 13:11-12).

Don't wait. Make the time now to act. To help you in your study of these important subjects, we provide free of charge the following booklets: *The Book of Revelation Unveiled* and *Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion*. Request them or read them at [www.ucg.org/booklets](http://www.ucg.org/booklets) today. You may also want to watch or listen to our sermon "Our Universe and the Sixth Seal" at [www.ucg.org/sermons/index2002.htm](http://www.ucg.org/sermons/index2002.htm) (scroll down to July 20). ❖

### Recommended Reading

To help you better understand how the heavenly signs fit into the overview of prophecy, we have prepared several booklets. Please request *Are We Living in the Time of the End?* and *The Book of Revelation Unveiled*. To learn more about how to respond to God's calling, request *Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion*.



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“LIGHTNING,” (Continued from page 16)

As the gentleman mentioned to me in his letter, “For my brothers and me, the one commonality that the tragedy additionally rendered was a fear of electricity, and an extra dose of fear for lightning and thunderstorms.” In his own words, “such a living reality crippled my life for a quarter of a century, and when lightning tore across the sky, only a crushing cloud of hopelessness, fear and despair would be mine.”

Naturally and quite humanly, all of this was an extension of that shocking picture frozen in the depths of his mind—for he, alone, had witnessed that life-crushing bolt that took his brother from him. Such was the power of that exhausting grip of fear which the lightning had struck into his natural senses.

And then, in the pages of this publication, he read the article “Let Not Your Heart Be Troubled.” It was at that point, after reading the article, that a loving God did something wonderful. He opened up the reader’s understanding! The man knelt down, prayed and thanked God as he came to realize that God was not apart from the storm, but in control; not only of the elements, but of his destiny.

Just think of it! What an amazing miracle occurred. It didn’t mean that the man’s brothers would be brought back—at least, not yet. But the man could confidently step forward and give his future to God, and not look over his shoulder for a lightning bolt.

### How to make sense out of the blows of life

Just like this man, at times the blows of this lifetime can devastate each of us. Sometimes it may be lightning, and at other times it can be physical, financial, emotional or spiritual blows that we receive from others. Sometimes it can be a self-inflicted blow. At times, we can simply wonder: Does God know what’s going on? Does He even care? Perhaps the following illustration will best explain God’s great love even when we cannot readily perceive it.

Many years ago, there was found in an African mine the most magnificent diamond in the world’s history. It was presented to the king of England to



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*“For as the lightning that flashes out of one part under heaven shines to the other part under heaven, so also the Son of Man will be in His day” (Luke 17:24).*

blaze in his state crown. The king sent it to Amsterdam to be cut. It was put into the hands of an expert diamond cutter. And what do you suppose he did with it? He took this gem of precious value and put a notch in it. Then he struck a hard blow with his instrument and, lo, the superb jewel lay in his hand cleft in two.

Did he do this out of recklessness, wastefulness or criminal carelessness? Not at all! For weeks that blow had been studied and planned. Drawings and models had been made of the gem. Its qualities, its defects, its lines of cleavage had all been studied with great care. The man to whom it was committed was one of the most skillful diamond cutters in the world.

Had that blow been a mistake? No! It was the climax of the diamond cutter’s skill. When he struck that blow, he did the one thing that would bring the gem to its most perfect shape, radiance and splendor. That blow, which seemed

to ruin the superb precious stone, was, in fact, its perfect redemption. From those two halves came two magnificent gems, which the skilled eye of the diamond cutter saw hidden in the rough, uncut stone that came from the mine.

Sometimes God lets a stinging blow fall upon our lives. Yes, the blood spurts, the nerves wince and the soul cries out in agony. For the moment, the blow seems to be an appalling mistake. But it is not, for we are priceless jewels to God. And He is the most skilled diamond cutter.

### The power of prayer

Is your life seemingly in ruins? Has God made one big mistake after another with you? Has He seemed to act at your spiritual and emotional expense? Then read on, please. What perhaps seemed senseless to a 13-year-old boy now has taken on great meaning. The power of prayer muted the power of a lightning bolt.

Since that prayer nearly 18 months ago now, the gentleman has never been frightened or debilitated by the power of a storm. In fact, he described how recently he and his wife had enjoyed watching from the window of their hotel room the awesome power and beauty of a storm as it unfolded all around them.

He mentioned that as he watched, he again prayed, as he does now with every storm, a prayer of thanksgiving to God for “being in the storm,” for being all-powerful, for caring as He does and being so protecting. And then he added, “I no longer pray in fear, but in faith.”

It’s a faith that moves beyond what he knows to what he does. The gentleman went on to mention in his letter that before he had read the article, he had never removed the faceplate of an electrical outlet, because his great fear from the past was strangling his present.

But now, he recently had remodeled his entire bathroom, including all the wiring, putting in the junction boxes, lighting and switches. Today, he has a healthy respect for electricity, but he no longer fears it.

### When lightning strikes again

The gentleman concluded his letter by sharing his hope for a prophecy yet to be fulfilled, when lightning strikes again—everywhere! It is an electrifying prophecy that he does not shy away from, but one that he eagerly awaits.

He wrote, “I pray for the day when, as I envision it, the sky will be torn in half by the most powerful lightning storm ever to etch the sky. And Christ will show the way to walk and the world—and my brothers—will get a chance to start all over.”

Such hope, his personal hope, is imprinted in the words of Luke, which describe the prophesied return of Jesus Christ: “*For as the lightning that flashes out of one part under heaven shines to the other part under heaven, so also the Son of Man will be in His day*” (Luke 17:24).

As I read his letter, I could not help but be inwardly moved that God had granted this man the “peace” that Christ had promised He would leave. How did

he, or how do you and I, make sense out of such senseless matters that befell his family, or for that matter our own families? God further defines the peace alluded to by Christ in John 14:27: “The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:7).

### Sharing our faith, not our fears

As Christians, each of us has a story. God has called each of us to share our faith, not our fears. As the days and years come and go, there will be more strikes and blows for this man as well as for you and me.

Students of Bible prophecy and people of faith know we are entering a time about which the book of Daniel plainly states, “And there shall be a

*Without perspective and without faith we could become paralyzed . . . That’s why today, we need to share more than our breakdowns on the road of life. We need to share the breakthroughs that a merciful God afforded us . . .*

time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation” (Daniel 12:1).

Without perspective and without faith we could become paralyzed, just as paralyzed as our fellow reader was for much of his life. That’s why today, we need to share more than our breakdowns on the road of life. We need to share the breakthroughs that a merciful God has afforded us in His time, His way and His moment in eternity.

You are familiar with the expression, “Out of the mouths of babes come words of wisdom.” I want to conclude this story with the remarkable words of our reader’s 2½-year-old daughter, who exclaimed when a recent storm approached, “God is in the storm!” In her daddy’s and in her example is this month’s illustration of “This is the way, walk in it” (Isaiah 30:21). ❖

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by Robin Webber

## When Lightning Strikes Again

It's been nearly a year and a half since I wrote an article for this column titled "Let Not Your Heart Be Troubled."

The article's encouragement was to look beyond the storm clouds of life, whatever might come our way. When I wrote that article, the war with Iraq was just around the corner. The 9/11 attacks had come, and the war on terrorism was ongoing—with consequences still not yet known to this day. Beyond that, I illustrated that the prophecies of the Bible indicate a yet incredible time of future conflict between nations before the rescuing intervention of Jesus Christ. I pointed out that on top of all the exterior "goings-on-of-life," our own personal worlds could be a little wobbly if not downright crumbling.

The reality stated in the article is simply that, left to us, our faith can become paralyzed. The scripture that I anchored the article around, found in John 14:27, fortifies us with the direct message from the mouth of Jesus: "Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid."

As I concluded that article, I shared the story of how my wife and I, along with our grandchildren, watched a thunder and lightning storm from our back porch doorway. What at first seemed like a scary event to our two granddaughters ultimately became an object lesson to all of us—that as scary as things may seem to be, God was not apart from the storm, but above the storm and in control!

Little did I realize that nearly a year later I would receive a letter from an individual who had been through a storm with incredible life-altering experiences, one that

moves far beyond a simple chat with granddaughters under the protective cover of a back porch. He had read my story. And now, he wanted to share his story. They are not two stories, but one, belonging to God. Upon reading his letter, I called him on the phone and asked if one day I might share it with a broader audience. He said, "Sure."

### When lightning struck first

In his letter, this man shared how when he was 13, his older brother, then 22, was cut down by a bolt of lightning. He died within seconds. The traumatic effects from that life-altering moment endured for nearly 25 years.

Like a pebble in a pond, the ripple effect touched every member of the family. His two younger brothers "left the church" (his words) that day, even though they attended for another seven years till they were 18. To this day, those siblings are still searching for a meaning to life that continues to elude them. But that's only a part of the story, and before you offer the younger brothers some good advice, let me share some more of what happened that day.

From that one incident, another brother was burned over 90 percent of his body with third-degree burns. Even though he lost a finger because of the bolt of electricity, his physical scars are now almost invisible. Today, he is a person of faith and a successful artist. But life has twists and turns, and there is still "more to the story." Yet another brother was struck by the lightning that day, and he lived a "crazy and nomadic" life and eventually took his own life just three years ago. Just imagine, a single bolt of lightning had a decidedly different effect on six separate lives.

(See "LIGHTNING," page 14)