

January - March 2016

ARMOR OF GOD

CONTENDING FOR THE FAITH



A Friend of Jesus

Islam—A Prophetic Consideration • Casting Down Strongholds • The First Commandment

Are You Secure?

In times of uncertainty, security, safety and stability are what comes to mind for the average person. To be secure creates a feeling of wanting to live forever in this life. To be physically fit, mentally sharp and financially secure is a quest everyone works hard to pursue. A firm foundation of health and wealth breeds confidence and a sense of stability. It allows people to navigate through life with less worries, boost confidence, thereby making life worth living. And if one has higher goals other than the material aspects of life, it gives them more time to devote on them.

Material Security is Fragile

However, material security is not all there is in life. Security anchored on the things most people painstakingly strive to attain is fragile. History is replete with accounts of the wealthy whose seemingly inexhaustible riches and enormously fabulous estates unexpectedly vanished. According to the Guinness World Records the Roman Empire is considered to have been the most powerful and enduring empire in history which lasted for almost 1,500 years, yet it also ended.

So, whatever state you may be in life, it is definitely temporal. It is common knowledge that what we are doing today will soon come to an end. That's because aside from being mortals, the events of this world are 'fluid' and unpredictable. Conflict between nations, terroristic activities of mad men, weather disturbances, etc., continue to threaten the security of mankind. Humanly devised safety measures cannot be fully relied upon to provide protection continually. The Bible foretells that confidence on man's capability to come up with peaceful solution is fallacious. It is written, "For when they say, 'Peace and safety!' then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape." [1 Thes. 5:3].

Now regarding riches, Jesus warned: "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" [Luke 12:15]. Continuing, He said: "The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.'" Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry. But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?" THIS IS HOW IT WILL BE WITH ANYONE WHO STORES UP THINGS FOR HIMSELF BUT IS NOT RICH TOWARD GOD.' [Luke 12:16-21]

Stabilizing Wealth

The last sentence of the parable [as capitalized] is not an outright denunciation of riches. Wealth is an effective instrument to fulfil one's quest to live permanently—even beyond the allotted lifespan of man. In other words it can "buy" eternal life. Paul wrote: Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy. Let them do good, that they be rich in good

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A Friend of Jesus

by Winston S. Co

There is an old hymn entitled “What a friend we have in Jesus”. For believers of Christ it is an endearing and inspiring hymn—a hymn that assures that we have a friend in Jesus. The lyrics goes like this:

**What a friend we have in Jesus.
All our sins and grieves to bear!
What a privilege to carry
Everything to God in prayer!**

**Oh, what peace we often forfeit,
Oh, what needless pain we bear
All because we do not carry
Everything to God in prayer!**

**Have we trials and temptations?
Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged—
Take it to the Lord in prayer.**

**Can we find a friend so faithful,
Who will all our sorrows share?
Jesus knows our every weakness;
Take it to the Lord in prayer.**

**Are we weak and heavy-laden,
Cumbered with a load of care?
Precious Savior, still our refuge—
Take it to the Lord in prayer.**

**Do thy friends despise, forsake thee?
Take it to the Lord in prayer!
In His arms He'll take and shield thee,
Thou wilt find a solace there.**

Wow, such a wonderful and comforting thought and assurance that we have a friend in Christ who is always at our side.

The hymn expresses the intimacy of this friendship. It is indeed a wonderful thing to be close to Jesus and consider Him as one of our intimate friend. However, there is a big difference between us considering Jesus as our friend, and Jesus considering us as His friend. There has to be a feeling of mutual acceptability for a friendship to be real.

Known by Christ

There is an interesting story in the scriptures emphasizing this fact. This account is undoubtedly written for our admonition and warning because many consider Jesus as a friend; yet Jesus may not even consider them one—and worse Jesus may even tell them one day 'I never knew you'. Isn't that terribly frustrating, to say the least?

Notice: "Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it. "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them. "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!' (Matthew 7:13-23)

Therefore, there is a difference between us considering Jesus as our friend, and Jesus considering us as His friend. You may know Christ but Christ may not know you.

It is more important for Christ to know us and to consider us as His friends. Galatians 4:9 says "But now after you have known God, or rather are known by God how is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage?"

Jesus said He knows who belongs to Him and who His friends are. In John 10:14-16 Jesus said He knows His sheep and the sheep knows Him and listen to His voice. Yes, not only do you want to be a friend of Jesus but to be Jesus' friend.

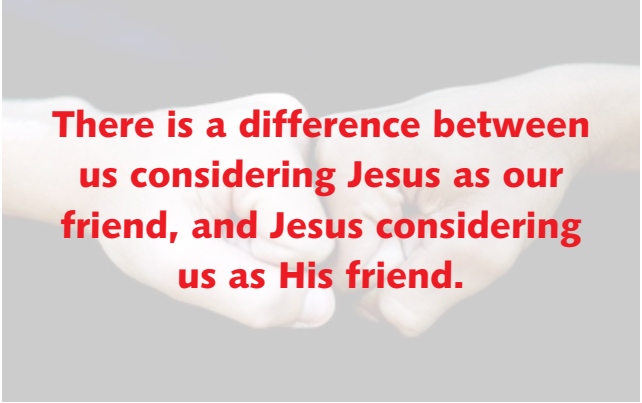
Friend versus Servant

The Bible tells us that prophets are servants of God. The

list would include all the major prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Nehemiah, Zechariah, David and the minor prophets like Micah, Joel, Jonah, Habakkuk, Malachi, etc. All these prophets are called servants of God. That includes Moses.

A servant is one who serves, a steward, a messenger. A servant is one who carries out or performs a task or an order assigned to him by the superior. The scripture says David is a servant (2 Samuel 3:18). Moses is also servant, a faithful one (1 Joshua 1:1-3; Hebrews 3:5). It is nice to be a servant of God but our relationship with God can be better than that.

Take for example Abraham. God considered Him as a friend. "But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham my friend." (Isaiah 41:8) Again in James 2:23; "And the Scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness'—and he was called a friend of God."



There is a difference between us considering Jesus as our friend, and Jesus considering us as His friend.

Friend of Jesus

Abraham is special. He is unique. There are certain qualities that God saw in him that made him a friend of God. How do we emulate his qualities to become a true friend of God too? No man (however mean) has no friend. We all have friends. Some friends are closer than others. Many of us have best friends. What are the characteristics of true friendship? You and your best friend share a history of experiences, a commonality of interests and uphold similar values. Consider the characteristics of your closest friend, and you will easily notice that you have more points to agree upon than to disagree.

How about our relationship with Christ? How do we become a true friend of Jesus? Here is what Jesus said: "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you." (John 15:13-15)

Here is a snapshot of the characteristics of true friendship. To become a friend of Jesus, you need these four

(4) key attributes; they are:

1. Bond of Loyalty

Jesus said: “Greater love has no one than this: “to lay down one's life for one's friends.” What is it to die for a friend? True friendship is that you are willing to take care of your friend as much as yourself. Except for the apostle John, all the disciples died for Christ! That is the depth of true friendship.

Loyalty is a wonderful virtue. It is faithfulness and devotion towards each other. There can never be true friendship without loyalty. Loyalty brings other virtues such as sincerity, honesty, reliance and trust into the relationship. For certain, no one would welcome a disloyal person to be a friend. Loyalty is the most important quality that you should look for in a friend. True friends stick together for better or for worse; through good times and bad times; through thick and thin. True friends are loyal to each other. Loyalty is the virtue that holds the friendship together. Loyalty is the mark of true friendship.

Abraham was loyal to God. In spite of his advanced age and childless, Abraham remained loyal to his God. Romans 4:18-24. Therefore, to be Jesus friend you have to be loyal to Him.

2. Keep The Commandments

You are my friends if you do what I command you. This is a very interesting statement of Jesus. What are these commands of Jesus? Many would immediately refer this to the twin greatest commandment; the command to love God and the command to love one another. Matthew 22:36-40: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

The first and greatest commandment is not a new command. In fact, Jesus quoted the Jewish Shema written in Deuteronomy 6:4. It is the summation of the first four commandments. The second command is quoted from Leviticus 19:18 which is also a summation of the last 6 commandments.

In short, the greatest commandment in the law is to keep the entirety of the 10 commandments as Jesus said in John 14:15 and 21. Again notice 1 John 5:3; “In fact, this is love for God: to keep his commands. And his commands are not burdensome.”

Commandment keeping is important in our friendship with Jesus because intimate friends share the same values, moral standard and principles. These commonalities make them consistent and dependable. And a true friend is one

who is dependable at all times. It is an assurance that he/she will always do the right thing to the best interest in both of you.

Abraham is a principled man. He is consistent in his action. In God's eyes Abraham is dependable. You can expect him to do the right thing before God at all times. This is how Abraham was commended in James 2:18-24.

To be a friend of Jesus, you have to share the same values and moral principles with Him. A true friend keeps the 10 commandments of God!

3. Keep Your Confidences

I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business (Jn. 15:15). Friends share secrets, but a best friend knows your plans. Good friends feel comfortable to share the most important things in their life because they find understanding and support for the vision.

You are a friend of Jesus if you know and share His plan, hope, purpose and mission for you. Do you know God's plan for you? You ought to, if you want to be a friend of Jesus. Jesus reveals His plan to His friends. This is what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 2:6-16. Abraham knew God's plan for humanity and for him. Hebrews 11:8-10 and 13-16

4. Be Like-minded

I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. As they say: Birds of the same feather flock together. Best friends can finish each other's sentences, share inside jokes, and communicate so much with just a look. Closest of friends think alike. It is this like-mindedness that forms the foundation for a deep relationship that continues throughout a lifetime. The scripture says we are to grow into the grace and knowledge of our Lord and savior Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18; Phil. 2:5).

This mind can be yours through the in-dwelling of the Holy Spirit (John 14:15-21, 23-26). The Holy Spirit is only given to the friend of Christ.

Can you become a friend of Jesus?

Yes you can! There is a way to become His intimate and close friend. There are four (4) characteristics that we must keep in mind to establish a true friendship with our Savior; these are:

1. Bond of Loyalty
2. Keeping The Commandments
3. Keep Your Confidence on Him
4. Be like-minded with Him

We want Jesus to consider us as His friend. Jesus said: “I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business.” John 15:15. Let us grow closer to Christ and be considered as His friends. **AG**

Islam—A Prophetic Consideration?

by Bill Watson

Strangely enough, no one is talking about how the most recent Middle Eastern refugee migration is similar to that of World War II and the horrific conditions Nazi Germany imposed on non-Nazis backs in those days—especially the Jews. Millions of Jewish people were massacred at the hands of the Nazi party leading up to, and during World War II. It was an appalling realization after discovering so many death camps and what they really were *doing* to so many millions of human beings. It was extraordinarily inordinate and shocking for the world to finally see the magnitude of such ruthless behavior!

Most of us don't realize there were some 20,000 concentrations camps that were used for a variety of reasons, but primarily for extermination or experimentation upon what the Nazis viewed as so-called "enemies of the state"—human beings, including women, children, and the elderly from all segments of society. Those considered "asocial," or believed to be deviant by government standards—Jehovah's Witnesses, gypsies, homosexuals, German Communists, anti-Socialists, a variety of ethnicities and of course the Jews, were exterminated by the millions.

However, from about 1933, when the Nazis came to power, until the end of the war in 1945, much of what was done in these concentration camps was unconfirmed and kept *secret* from the world. The detailed atrocities, human experimentation, sexual abuses and slavery, abortions, forced labor camps, and extermination centers were for the most part unknown. It really wasn't until the United States and its allies liberated thousands of POWs that these heinous facilities became plainly known for just what they actually were. Finally, as these camps became liberated, the enormous extent and detail of these "crimes against humanity," conducted within the walls of these camps, finally was revealed to the rest of the world, stunning even the German people with the grotesque images of such malicious treatment the Nazis imposed upon so many innocent people.

But as bewildering and horrifying as that was, by contrast, in our world today, *astoundingly*, Islamic religious groups, claiming to be following the Qur'an, especially those of the Sunni faction, under the guise of IS (Islamic State), or ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), *publicly*, in the open for *all the world* to see, are

committing crimes against humanity, violating human rights on a genocidal scale, especially upon traditional Christians throughout the regions of Iraq, Syria, Libya, and other parts of the Middle East and North Africa, with Europe, the Netherlands, and Turkey being the next targets. It's shockingly unbelievable and unequivocally as brutal and savage as the Nazis!

These atrocities are committed systemically throughout the region in *open daylight*! Recently, the city of Mosul has been cleared of most, if not all, traditional Christians, along with many children and mothers being mercilessly beheaded. Some have had their heads impaled on sticks, displayed in public, like some kind of macabre horror film—their *only crime*: they claimed the name of *Jesus Christ*. There have been reports of crucifixions, and women and children being buried alive, or group drownings in cages, and of course homicidal bombers. Others have been kidnapped, raped, held as sex slaves, children included, sold as so much chattel. Others are held for ransom, and when they get the money, the person is killed regardless—their body parts sent back in a box to the family, as was recently done to a Catholic priest, *after* the family paid the ransom.

It's a *nightmare*—a grotesque situation being orchestrated *IN THE OPEN FOR ALL THE WORLD TO SEE*—yet no Western nation, China, Japan, or Russia has taken any serious steps to put an end to this *demonic madness* conducted by this Muslim group called ISIL. Why do you suppose that is? There certainly isn't any question or doubt about what's happening. There are all kinds of proof validating, confirming, and authenticating these "crimes against humanity."

So what is stopping the world from carrying out their *moral duty* to obliterate this faction of *deranged* Muslims that are on an Islamic religious mission? And don't kid yourself, it is a religious mission they are on. Remember, in their minds, it's all about dominating the world with their 7th-century ways of oppression.

What Are We Missing?

Strangely enough, many Western leaders *do not understand* Islam. They believe the *moderate* Muslims of the West define what Islam is—when in fact, that couldn't be further from the truth. Now I know many may find that

statement uncomfortable and perhaps rather disturbing, because many “Western moderates” would like to consider these Muslim extremists an aberration, or oddity of sorts that are misappropriating and misapplying the beliefs of Islam and the Qur’an. But as much as those in the West would like to believe there is such a thing as a “moderate Muslim,” make no mistake: moderate Islam *doesn’t* exist to any significant degree—not even in Central Asia where Muslims co-exist peacefully with non-Muslims.

However, though some will make the case this is slightly being done sporadically, keep in mind that it’s not because anything has changed in their teachings of Jihad—it’s just simply due to certain Islamic laws presently being *ignored*. History has *proved*: nations allowing this kind of fraternization can expect the “true” Muslims among them to *change* and *influence* the *hosting culture* to adopt and embrace Islam—whether by force (jihad), or by infringing on and embedding in the hosting culture and conquering it from *within*—that’s just what they do!

For example, the prominent American Muslim spokesman Siraj Wahaj, who by some is considered a moderate Muslim, addressed the U.S. Congress back in 1991, attempting 10 years later to ease America’s nerves after 9/11 by saying he felt he should go on a jihad against this kind of extremism. However, this *same individual* recently warned the United States that if they didn’t accept the Islamic agenda, it would fall! He has made additional comments indicating he would like to see the United States replace the constitutional government with a *caliphate*.

Sadly, there is a much bigger problem with Western leaders than we realize, when you understand that a man like this is allowed to give a prayer in the audience of the very men and women who are expected to uphold the U.S. Constitution. Obviously, this illustrates a symptom of a much more serious lack of judgment—a naivete that’s hard to comprehend from Western leaders you’d expect would know better.

In a recent interview, the Iraqi Grand Ayatollah Ahmad Hussein al-Baghdadi said, “But if they [Christians] still refuse—then we fight them, and we abduct their women, and destroy their churches—this is Islam! ...Come on, learn what Islam is, are you even a Muslim?” (ref. *The Post and Before It’s News*, 10-18-15). This statement is from a very prominent Islamic leader. Yet, we dismiss this rhetoric as just words without meaning since we consider this “extremism”—and then comfort ourselves by thinking, assuredly, this just can’t represent what Islam really is. That

is a very unfortunate view!

We must keep in mind the significance of this statement and remember al-Baghdadi is a Marja. What that means for the Shia Muslim is, he is considered a “source of emulation.” In other words, he is viewed as a powerful voice of allegedly radical leadership for the Muslim faith. He is determined to make it very clear: Islam *cannot* co-exist with any other faith according to his interpretation of Islamic doctrine (based on the Qur’an and Hadith)—because he believes “this is Islam.”

He proceeded to further explain all capable Muslims are *obligated* to fight for freedom of all occupied areas, including Israel! And furthermore, those areas not presently occupied?—Muslims are *mandated*, when they are prepared with enough strength, to go on the offensive and conquer all non-Muslims. The Ayatollah went on to expound that if they (those of the book, Christians and Jews) want to maintain their distinctive faith apart from Islam, they must concede to

paying the *jizya* (Islamic poll tax) and live according to the *dhimmi* rules (guidelines for “protected persons” a.k.a. the conquered people). This is their only option besides out-rightly adopting the Islamic faith. Anything else will necessitate and *require* the Muslim to fight the infidel.

Throughout the interview, al-Baghdadi was emphatic that this is the word of Allah! As far as the Ayatollah is concerned, this is fundamental, and if you don’t understand or agree with this, you

don’t understand what Islam really is. Unquestionably, the vast majority, virtually *all* Muslim clerics, both Sunni and Shia, hold these views—clearly illustrating these are *not* “radical” views, but rather in the Middle East, they are the status quo. It is the norm—the *accepted definition* of what Islam actually is and its ultimate intent and objective.

Unfortunately, many in the West *just don’t get it*. They continue to believe Islam is a religion of peace, and from a jihadist’s point of view, he would agree. However, his framing of that idea is engrafted in the concept of dominance, as was theorized by one of the 20th century’s foremost Muslim Brotherhood’s promoters of jihad, Sayyid Qutb. Essentially, his idea of peace is when *everyone* becomes Muslim, or at least subject to Islamic law; and how that peace will be secured is through jihad! So, that’s why a Muslim jihadist would agree Islam is a religion of peace. It is, as long as you concede to the dominance of Islamic law.

So many non-Muslims, especially here in the West, don’t realize these Sunni and Shia Muslims *use the Qur’an* to justify terrorism. This is undeniable! Notice just a few verses



from the Qur'an that Muslims use to justify jihad:

► *Then when the sacred months have passed slay the unbelievers (idolaters) wherever you find them, and take them captive, and besiege them, and prepare for them each ambush... (Qur'an 9:5).*

► *Therefore, when you meet the unbelievers in fight, smite at their necks (behead them), at length, when you have thoroughly subdued them, bind a bond firmly on them (Qur'an 47:4).*

► *O you who believe! Take not the Jew and the Christian for your friends and protectors: they are but friends and protectors to each other and he amongst you that turns to them (for friendship) is of them (Qur'an 5:51).*

► *O Prophet, make war on (strive hard against) the unbelievers and the hypocrites and deal rigorously with (be firm against) them. Their abode is hell, an evil refuge indeed (Qur'an 9:73).*

► *Those who believe fight in the cause of Allah (jihad) and those who reject faith fight in the cause of evil: so fight you against the friends of Satan (Qur'an 4:76).*

► *O you who believe! Fight the unbeliever who gird you about, and let them find firmness in you: and know that Allah is with those who fear Him (Qur'an 9:123).*

These are just a few of over 100 verses in the Qur'an encouraging believers to engage in jihad against non-Muslims. Yet, many will argue there isn't any difference with these directives from Allah when compared to that which the God of the Old Testament made against so many nations He mandated Israel to conquer. But is that a fair assessment of this comparison? Or is there an important distinction to be made?

Contextually, there is a *critical difference* to be made when comparing this alleged similarity. But that doesn't stop some Islamic apologists from attempting to make the case that Muslims are no more violent than those who followed the directives of the God of Israel. They will claim that selectively picking scriptures out of the Bible can be equally as easy to illustrate the moral equivalence between Islam and those following the Judeo-Christian Bible. These Islamic apologists insist you will find this kind of violence described in many religions throughout mankind's history and embedded in a variety of cultural traditions.

They will even take scriptures out of the New Testament such as Luke 19:26–27 and attempt to spin them to say Christ was instructing His followers to slay His enemies in His presence. Unfortunately, they often fail to explain the

context is a parable to illustrate a spiritual *principle*, not a directive to His followers to kill His enemies. They will also use, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. I am sent to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother..." (Matthew 10:34–35).

Yet most apologists fail to admit, if this were true and Christ was advocating jihad behavior, it would be kept within the limitations of one's family. But regardless, it is simply ridiculous and laughable to equate the Qur'an's jihad directives with the peaceful message of Jesus Christ, which is clearly illustrated throughout the Bible. Contextually, taking that into consideration, it becomes evident Christ was speaking *allegorically*—a metaphor—for the spiritual effect His teachings would have within some families.

But perhaps *most* importantly, throughout the whole Bible, when God gives a directive for an invasion of a nation of people, He is very *specific* as to *who* they are, and *where* and *when* it should be done. Admittedly, the Bible is filled with descriptions of wars between His nation Israel and other nations He wanted them to fight, especially those living in the land He intended to give them (Deuteronomy 7:1–2). But clearly, a *major distinction* between these historical records of war and the Qur'an's instructions to fight non-Muslims is that the latter are *present mandates* that apply at all times and in all places.

Therefore, taking the Qur'an for what it says, make no mistake, it is an *open-ended directive* to wage war on all unbelievers at any time, whenever and wherever you come up against those who resist the laws or tenets of Islam. This is something most do not recognize or refuse to accept in light of our present "politically correct" environment, and it may well exacerbate our own decline and seriously add to our ultimate collapse as a Western Judeo-Christian culture!



What Is So Threatening to the West

The Islamic religion or movement is the fastest growing religion presently in the world, according to many sources. The *Pew Research Center's* religious profile claims about 1.6 billion Muslims and 2.17 billion Christians are on the planet as of 2010. Its present growth rate is postured to exceed Christianity, some say as early as 2050, while others

say not until the end of the 21st century. Many facts and figures are exaggerated regarding Islam's growth from a variety of sources (e.g., *BBC, 2003 Guinness Book of World Records, Pew Forum, Carnegie Endowment for World Peace-2007, Wikipedia*), so it appears that Islam is presently the fastest growing religion *in the world*. However, much of that is actually due to the reproductive rate of Muslims compared to other religions—an average of 3.1 percent compared to Christians at 2.7 percent. Comparably, regardless of religion, the world's total reproductive rate averages 2.5 percent.

It's been estimated that as of 2009, the world's population was 23 percent Muslim, with 80 percent of them living outside the Arab world since 2002. Muslims are expected to be at about 26.4 percent of the population by about 2030. (This is based on an approximate projected world population of 7.9 billion.) It's been further estimated from about 1990 through 2010, the global Muslim population increased by about 2.2 percent annually.

A common misconception or stereotype in the West about Muslims is that most are Arabic. This isn't true! Most Muslims actually live in Asia and Africa. Generally, they are considered "people of color," with about 60 percent of all Muslims living in Asia and about another 25 percent living in Africa, and many in Indonesia.

Admittedly, this has been very dynamic and fluid over the last few decades, with Western and Eastern Europe and North America becoming destination spots for many Islamists, and especially most recently with so many migrating refugees moving westward. The primary means by which Muslims are growing in these areas is by two specific ways: immigration and the high Muslim birth rate, not necessarily by adding converts through their evangelistic methods. To illustrate this point, seven percent of all babies born in the European Union in 1998 were Muslim and as many as 57 percent in Brussels.

According to research scientist Carol Stone, it's also very difficult to estimate how many Muslims are in North America today, due to a lack of reliable information. However, there are some signs that can give us some idea; but admittedly, inadequate religious census polling, inaccurate membership roles from mosques, and exaggerated figures from Muslims make it all rather difficult to arrive at a definite number.

Yet, Muslim and Christian sources all agree, Islam is the fastest growing religion in North America, also. According to *The Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches, 2000*, the claim is made that 3.9 million Muslims are in the United States. *Islamic Horizons* states there are approximately 8–10 million Muslims in all of North America. However, the most common number of Muslims used by the United States government is about six million,

with the top five largest concentrations being in California, New York, Illinois, New Jersey, and Indiana. Michigan, Virginia, Texas, Ohio, and Maryland round out the top 10. It's been estimated there are about 400,000 Muslims in the general Chicago area alone.



Though some of these figures can be debated, what is certain is the enormous growth rate Islam is experiencing. According to the United Nation's statistics, Islam has grown by 25 percent in the United States between 1989 and 1998. In 1990, there were only about 50 Muslim schools in the USA. Today, the number exceeds 200 nationwide. According to the *Islamic School League of America (ISLA)* an estimated 40,000 children are enrolled in Islamic schools throughout the USA. This represents a 25 percent increase since 2006. Mosques have tripled throughout the United States since about 1990. Presently, there are over 2,500 mosques and Islamic centers across the United States.

So, what was once a Judeo-Christian culture in North America, especially in the United States, is now becoming forcefully exposed to not only a Middle Eastern religion, but also a Middle Eastern culture not respectful of Western civilization, or lifestyle of the United States and Canada. Instead of assimilating, conversely, these foreign nationals are establishing their own neighborhoods to preserve their own cultural presence and laws (sharia in particular) within the host nation. They are segregated communities, because that's what they *do*.

This brings up many questions that, based on some of the progressive conditions we see developing, causes one to ponder just where all this is leading, especially *prophetically*. Should it be considered more seriously? Looking at the present Muslim "migration invasion" of Europe, including the European Union, one can't help but ask: Are we witnessing a major cultural shift of such gigantic proportions that it may lead to a significant rearrangement of the whole continent's population and its ethos? Are these conditions becoming the proverbial "straw that breaks the camel's back," resulting in contributing to the collapse of the European Union as we know it today? And if so, what significance might it have? We will address this in the next edition of the *International News*.

Casting Down Strongholds

by Lloyd W. Cary

The word “strongholds” is seldom used today. It sounds strange to our modern ears. Yet, is vital to our Christian walk that we understand this concept as we continue in growing and overcoming in our Christian walk!

This year's round of God's Feast days is over. We are now entering the dark season of the world, the days of Satan's holidays.

Contrary to what many believe and teach, Satan is real. In fact, he is *more* real than you and I are because he is a *spirit* being, while we are only flesh and blood. This evil fallen angel (Luke 10:18 KJV throughout) is likened to a roaring lion, walking about, seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter 5:8) and will do his best to suck you back into this present evil world (Galatians 1:4). The apostle Peter warns, “Lest Satan should get an advantage of us: *for we are not ignorant of his devices*” (2 Corinthians 2:11). Your Bible shows Satan is very real and that he has and is deceiving the whole world (Revelation 12:9). His goal is to deceive you and make you a captive of sin. He will attempt to oppose and discourage you by setting up what the Bible calls “stumbling blocks” and “strongholds” in your mind to cause you to sin, to separate you from God and from the fellowship of God's people. He will try to make you feel low, down, blue, sometimes angry or offended, and discouraged. Discouraged soldiers do not win battles!

As Christians, we have three main enemies: 1.) the world and its near-magnetic influences (Matthew 4:19); 2.) our own human nature (Romans 8:7); and 3.) Satan and his minions, his false ministers (2 Corinthians 11:13–15) and worldly appeals (1 John 2:16). There are stumbling blocks and there are strongholds; we need to be aware of the differences. The evil one often uses stumbling blocks and strongholds to implement all three kinds of temptations. What is frightening is that many of these devices have already been planted in our minds and we are not even aware of it!

What IS a Stumbling Block?

Have you ever stumbled, *missed the mark*, in your Christian walk?

A stumbling block is something that “trips us up”—a slip, an incident, a mistake. This is *not* a way of life! Moses forbade the putting of a stumbling block before the blind

(Leviticus 19:14). Spiritually, it is anything that trips us up in our spiritual walk—something we do not see in advance and catches us by surprise, something that catches us “off guard.” We all stumble or trip up occasionally. The Bible calls these “sins of ignorance” (Leviticus 4:14). Stumbling blocks are more occasional. Hopefully we catch ourselves, repent, and pick ourselves up and continue.

What IS a Stronghold?

One of the most successful tactics Satan uses against the Christian is to build strongholds in his life. No aspect of our spiritual warfare is more important than learning how to recognize and destroy them, for as long as they exist, they will cause frustration, hinder spiritual growth, and cause defeat in our spiritual lives. As a Christian, have you ever felt there is a *roadblock*—a *stronghold* over you—a habit, a sin, a mindset—that is almost “impossible” to overcome in your Christian walk? Strongholds usually are stronger and more permanent than stumbling blocks. They are like invisible walled “dug in” fortifications. And they are something we, with God's help, must *cast down*!

Strongholds are erroneous thinking patterns. They can become bad habits, or ways of life. They are *patterns* or “strongholds” in our minds that cause us to think *contrary* to the truth. They can be strongholds of anger, alcohol, pornography, or any other.

Synonyms are: a fort, bastion, castle, citadel, fortification, battlement, or fortress. *Spiritually*, it means *something that has a STRONG HOLD on us*! It is something difficult to shake off.

On a psychological level, strongholds are an integral part of our belief systems. They are the driving force behind our thought patterns, attitudes, and actions. No matter what we say in everyday life or what we truly believe about the world around us—God, others, or ourselves—the strongholds in our minds come to surface when we are put in pressure situations.

Stumbling blocks can be temptations to give in to anger, fear, lust, drunkenness, fornication, viewing pornography, gossip, Sabbath breaking, and other sins. We can find whole lists of stumbling blocks and strongholds in Romans 1:28–32 and 2 Timothy 3:1–7. Look them up.

For example, a common stronghold that discourages Christians is when they feel dirty, guilty, unworthy, and

ashamed of their past. They are so used to thinking about their past, that it's driven them to think and feel like a *failure*! They feel unworthy to have a close intimate relationship with God or with God's people, which greatly affects their spiritual strength and faith. No wonder Satan tries to build such strongholds in our minds! They produce spiritual cripples!

Some of these strongholds can be set up in our minds by well-meaning friends, parents, enemies, work, schools, or by past experiences. Or by Satan himself.

Strongholds are built upon the foundations of deception and lies that we've accepted into our minds as something we believe to be true. They become part of our thinking. So how do you *counter* a lie? With the truth! Where do we *find* the truth? In the Word of God (John 17:17). Ephesians 6:17 explains, "...the *sword* of the Spirit, which IS the *Word of God*."

"For the Word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12). The Word of God can be likened to a bright light shining into the dark recesses of our minds, exposing these acquired strongholds. It is like a scalpel sharp instrument surgically dividing the cancer of error from Truth.

If you want to tear down the strongholds or lies and error, you need to begin meditating on the exact *OPPOSITE* of false tradition and error—that of God's Word. When we neglect our Bible reading and Bible study, our spiritual swords begin to tarnish and rust, our light begins to diminish, and we will not be good Christian soldiers.

So How Does Satan Build These Strongholds?

The devil's helpers begin building spiritual strongholds by reminding us of our *past* failures and sins. He brings up imaginations and things that we ought not to be dwelling upon, and tries to make us *agree with him* on how badly we failed. We then have the choice to listen and agree with him or listen to God's Word, which is telling us that those sins have been washed away (Romans 8:1). If we take *the devil's bait* and begin to meditate on our sins and failures, they will begin to *pull us down spiritually*, and strongholds will develop. We will begin to see ourselves as *failures* because we've taken the bait and chosen to meditate on a *lie* that the devil has fed us!

Strongholds Can and Do Play a Big Part in How We Feel!

If we *think* we are failures, we will *feel* like failures. If you *think* you're hopeless, you will *feel* hopeless. If you *think* you cannot overcome a fault or sin, you stop trying. Changing the

way you *think* can make a big difference in the way you *feel*!

If you *know* you are forgiven, you'll feel clean inside. If you constantly think of your past failures, you will see yourself as associated with them. But if you constantly think of how you have been separated from your past when the blood of Jesus has washed it away, you will feel bright and clean inside.

A Personal Experience

At the Feast in St. Catherine's this year, I was approached by a dear lady who asked if I was ready for my sermonette. I replied with what I felt was a humble reply, that I *hoped* so. She detected I had some kind of stronghold of *self doubt* in my mind, and pursued it. She pointed out that I had a spirit or "stronghold" in my mind that was *not* from God! She encouraged me, saying that I had a message for God's people and should speak out *boldly* and with *confidence*. Then she said a prayer with me to cast out any stumbling blocks or strongholds in my mind. As a result, my presentation was favorably received by most. Thank you, my sister (you know who you are), for shining the light of God's Word onto one of my strongholds!

How Do We Tear Down Strongholds?

In 2 Corinthians 10:3–5, we are told that our spiritual weaponry is *DESIGNED* to *tear down* strongholds: "For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh: (For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but *mighty* through God to the pulling down of strong holds;) Casting down *imaginations*, and every high thing that exalteth itself *against* the knowledge of God, and *bringing into captivity every thought* to the obedience of Christ."

Them's Fightin' Words—A Call to Battle!

This is an excellent verse showing us how to tear down the strongholds in our minds. First, since the Sword of the Spirit is the only *offensive* piece of our weaponry, it is a critical tool for tearing down strongholds.

We need to go on the *offensive* to tear down a stronghold, and the Word of God is the *weapon* you can't afford *not* to use!

So when some inner voice tells us, *You really messed up this time! You won't make it!*—we need to counter it with, "1 John 3:5 tells me that the *reason* Jesus went to the cross was to *take away* my sin! Hebrews 8:12 tells me that God has chosen to *forget* my sin!" Romans 8:1 tells us, "There is therefore now *no condemnation* to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit." *I am not guilty!* And neither are *you* if you are in Christ Jesus!

What else are we told in this verse? We are to cast down *imaginations* and *every thought* that comes into our minds that *opposes* the knowledge of God. Since God associates

Himself with His Word (John 1:1), if anything comes into our minds that is *contrary* to God's Word, throw it out! Do not waste your time thinking about it or trying to reason with it. If Satan is trying to tell you God is not wanting to forgive you, then don't listen to it! Why? Because God's Word says otherwise: "Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool" (Isaiah 1:18).

Many Disillusioned People Have Strongholds Against God Himself!

Nearly all agnostics and atheists have stumbling blocks and strongholds against God Himself! God's Word declares, "For the invisible things of Him from the creation of the world are *CLEARLY SEEN*, being understood by the things that are made, *even* His eternal power and Godhead; so that *they are without excuse*: Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became *vain* in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was *darkened*. Professing *themselves* to be wise, they became fools" (Romans 1:20–22). The scholarly "higher critics" of God's Word raise objections to God's existence and His Word that have been answered over and over again for thousands of years, but they refuse to acknowledge the truth and go on parroting them to each new generation of would-be believers. They have *strongholds* in their minds that they refuse to cast down! God says they are "without excuse." God will deal with them at a later time.

The plain truth is that not only does God *want* to forgive your sins so that your relationship with Him can be restored, He longs—He deeply *desires* to do so! God wants to forgive us even more than we want to be forgiven (1 Timothy 2:4). The penalty for our sins has *already been paid* through the blood of Jesus Christ. All we need to do is believe it and make the right choices (Acts 2:37–38). One of the *last* things Satan wants us to believe is God's forgiving and loving care for us—even after we have messed up!

Listening to and reasoning with the things the devil puts into your mind by whatever means is exactly what he *wants* you to do. It feeds his strongholds when you allow your mind to meditate on Satan's word, the *opposite* of God's Word. *Cut him off* at the source and say "NO" to the lies and deceptions he's been feeding you, and at the same time turn to God's Word. This process works for any lie of the enemy. Begin to feed, meditate upon, think about, and dwell upon the *truth*. It will stop the devil dead in his tracks! When He was tempted by the evil one, Jesus quoted Scripture (Matthew 4:1–10; Luke 4:1–12). You can, too!

Smack! There's That "Brick Wall" Again!

Sometimes, no matter how hard we try, it seems we hit

that proverbial "brick wall."

Often we feel we are doing well, and then, *smack!* Some of those old strongholds we thought we had overcome are revived from some hidden deep crevices of our minds. Old lies of the enemy such as, "You are stupid"; "You are worthless"; "You are a bad mother/father"; etc. or any other stronghold (anger, jealousy, lust, greed, envy, etc.) that has built a giant invisible strong tower in your psyche. This, brethren, is how you pull it down, brick by brick. You are delivered as you repeat the process so many times that it becomes as natural to you as breathing. When you are successful, you put your foot on the neck of your enemy and he is forced to admit that Jesus is Lord! This is why we must put on the helmet of salvation—to guard our thought life, lest we allow the enemy to find a chink in our armor and exploit it, or lest we allow a sinful habit pattern to remain unchecked and develop into a stronghold. Hold forth the shield of faith, draw the sword of the spirit, and fight the good fight of faith!

Nonetheless, sometimes we still feel discouraged. We still sin and feel, "I couldn't help it. The *devil* made me do it!" Some think that they cannot be influenced by demons, but nothing could be further from the truth!

God's Word warns, "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour" (1 Peter 5:8).

When Christ's disciples could not cast out literal demons, Christ told them in Mark 9:29, "This kind can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and fasting."

Home Again!

We came home from the Feast after hearing many inspiring sermons and sermonettes. Don't allow the devil to suck you back into the attitudes and "stinkin' thinkin'" and filth of this world! That's the warfare we face. Don't give in to P.F.L.—"Post-Feast Letdown"! Refuse to let go!

We cast down strongholds and imaginations by being transformed through the renewing of our minds: "And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God" (Romans 12:2). As we meditate and wash our minds with God's Word, we will be transformed by the renewing of our minds, and we will come to know the will of God, and discern what is right, perfect, and good. Our strongholds, which are based upon error and deception, will not stand a chance as the light of God's Word (truth) is shed upon those areas of our minds.

Remember James 4:8: "Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded."

But above all, remember that *God* gets all the glory, not our own puny "will power," because our weapons are not of

this world; they are “other-worldly!”

Again, What Must We Do to Cast Down Strongholds in Our Lives and Continue in God's Feast Spirit?

You have heard these admonitions before. They are not new, but they are *vital* if we are to endure to the end (Matthew 10:22). God's Word gives us everything we need to cast down imaginations and strongholds.

OUR SPIRITUAL WEAPONS INCLUDE THESE, “that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works” (2 Timothy 3:17):

► **PRAYER:** Never forget the necessity of continuing prayer (1 Thessalonians 5:17; James 5:16).

► **BIBLE STUDY AND BIBLE READING:** Willfully allow God's Word to reprove, correct, and instruct you. You may need to increase or *double* your Bible study time until it becomes a well established *habit*. You can do it! Don't put it off as a “should do.” Get a grip. Just do it!

► **OBEDIENCE TO GOD'S WORD:** “...the Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them that *obey* Him” (Acts 5:32).

► **LIVE BY FAITH:** The time is coming when you will either believe what you *see* and what you *hear*—or you will believe God's inspired Word. “Now the just shall live by faith: but if any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him” (Hebrews 10:38).

► **MEDITATE ON GOD'S WORD:** This is not some New Age mystical state of mind, but it means to deeply think about what you have read in God's Word. David said, “I have more understanding than all my teachers: for thy testimonies are my *meditation*” (Psalm 119:99).

► **FASTING:** Putting our personal comforts aside, occasional fasting helps humble us (Isaiah 66:2).

► **WALK IN LOVE:** “And walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given Himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet smelling savour” (Ephesians 5:2).

May God be with you as you draw nigh to Him (James 4:8). And keep on casting down those strongholds! **Ω**

Are You Secure? (continued from page 2)

works, ready to give, willing to share, storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life (1 Timothy 6:17-19).

Jesus added: Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal [Mat. 6:19-20].

Wealth originates from the earth. The Psalmist wrote: “The earth is the LORD'S, and the fullness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein” [Psalms 24:1]. And to mankind, the Bible says, “For in Him we live and move and have our being” [Acts 17:28]. God then owns everything. Therefore, He deserves acknowledgement, honour and reverence. A grateful heart should put God first before anything else. Proverbs 3:9 says, “Honour the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops.” Setting aside a small portion of your wealth for God is not only honouring Him, but putting up a solid investment which Jesus said won't 'fly away' [Mat.6:19-20].

Securing Security

The God who wants all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth [1 Tim.2:4] is the same God who created and sustains the entire human race [Gen. 1:26-29]. For ages past and up until today, He offered a lasting solution to man's quest for security and peace of mind.

King David wrote one of the most reassuring psalm by describing the kind of God we ought to be secure with and bank our hope on: “The LORD is my **rock** [*craggy and massive rock of which Jesus is in 1 Cor. 10:4*], my **fortress** [*castle, a defence, a fort, a strong place*] and my **deliverer** [*one who carry us away to safety*]; my God is my rock, in whom I take **refuge** [*one whom we can confide with, make refuge to and have hope on*]. He is my **shield** [*defence, protector*] and the **horn** [*sturdy and strong as an elephant's tusk*] of my **salvation** [*the only saviour, Acts. 4:12*], my **stronghold** [*a towering fortress unreachable by the adversaries*], [Psalms 18:2].

Jesus is Calling

He said: Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light [Mat. 11:28-30].

Finally, a parting line from the apostle Paul: For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's [Romans 14:8].

What's in it for us to be with Lord? Our Saviour made a guarantee through this famous verse: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life, [John 3:16]

Jesus used the word perish which is *apollumi* in Greek, meaning to destroy *fully*. He presented a choice between the security of believing in Him and gain eternal life; or rejecting Him and perish, which means as if you and I never existed in the first place. You have a choice, choose wisely.

[To understand more about what a truly secure life is, request a **FREE** copy of the following publications: **When I Die What Happens Next?** & **Assurance of Salvation**. Just text your name and complete address to 0917-8116365 or call (02) 995-0294].

Eleno S. Mellomida

The First Commandment

by Ferdie S. Padilla

As true Christians, we should know by heart the Ten Commandments. We should know by heart the intent of these laws. And more importantly, as true Christians, we should lead by example on how these laws are applied and lived every day. If we do this, then we would truly experience how it is to serve God and love Him only with all our hearts, with all our strength, with all our soul, and with all our mind.

Now, do you know that the right application of the Ten Commandments or any other statutes start with understanding the first commandment? The first command sets the tone for understanding the rest of the nine commandments. It is a “primacy” law; and the proper recognition, understanding and observance of it will definitely influence our understanding, appreciation and application of the rest of God’s laws. It is the law that sets the order of things - and observing it should become our number one priority.

Dissecting the First Commandment

The first commandment is stated in Exo 20:1-3 “And God spoke all these words: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.” Pretty straightforward and direct statement. At this juncture we should take note of verse 1. It was God who spoke all of the Ten Commandments. This should dispel the mistaken notion held on to by some Christian groups that these are Mosaic laws. No, they’re not. They are the laws of God—it was God who spoke not Moses; and that should put to silence any argument to the contrary.

Now let’s try to understand more about the first commandment. It begins with an affirmative “I am the LORD your God”. So who exactly is this God? Take note that he used the name the “LORD”. Who is this LORD? If we can identify this LORD, then He is God. So let’s back track a little to chapter 3 of the same book at the account of the burning bush and we will read excerpts in Exo 3:13-15 “Moses said to God, “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them?” God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” God also said to Moses, “Say to the Israelites, (take note of this) ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation.” This God (the LORD) then is none other than the God who dealt with the

patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is also interesting to note that the word “God” used in verse 2 of Exodus 20 as well as in Exodus 3 is the same word used in the creation account of Genesis 1. The word is “*Elohim*” and it is a plural noun, much like family is a plural noun. But that’s just an aside and it would take another article to discuss that and its implications fully. However, we would just like to point out and draw the connection between the God who spoke to Moses and of the patriarchs and the one who created the heavens and the earth as stated in Gen 1:1 “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” This is the same God who is being referred to as the LORD (the self-existent One or the Eternal One). In other words, the God whom we should recognize and worship is the God of creation, the God who revealed Himself from the beginning of the Bible. This God is revealed as someone who simply is (no beginning no end). He is Eternal and that speaks volume about His nature; the first point to remember.

Now let’s continue with the rest of the statement: Exo 20:2 “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.” Now here is again another clue as to who this God is. He specifically identifies Himself in this command as the God who led ancient Israel out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. Historically speaking that would refer to an event where they went out of Egypt and it is interesting to note the timing of that event. Let’s go to Exo 12:17 “Celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread, because it was on this very day that I brought your divisions out of Egypt. Celebrate this day as a lasting ordinance for the generations to come.” Here, the God of Israel was commanding the Israelites to celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread to commemorate their freedom from slavery in Egypt. It was on the first day of the Days of Unleavened Bread that they went up out of Egypt. The timing is noteworthy for its spiritual significance. We have come to understand that leavening in biblical typology is a symbol of sin bearing in mind what the apostle Paul says in 1 Co 5:8 “Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth.”

Notice that in this instance, yeast is associated with malice and wickedness. And bread without yeast in this occasion is associated with sincerity and truth. In a way, Israel’s leaving Egypt to celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread is symbolic of quitting a life of sin and slavery, and start living a life of obedience and righteousness. And God, in the first commandment tells us that He will lead us out of our sinful lives (our personal Egypt) and be freed from the shackles of sin.

Consequently, we can now have a new life of knowing Him as well as His laws that define how to live a meaningful, peaceful and joyful life. That is the salient feature of this commandment. It tells us we have a problem with our past, and even with our current lives, in that we are all sinners. And God is the God who will lead us out of this miserable life. Let's remember that second point.

Now, let's continue with Exo 20:3 "You shall have no other gods before me." What is this verse trying to convey? Simply put, God wants our undivided loyalty to Him. Why? The answer is made plain when we continue with verse 2: Exo 20:3 "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." Please take note of the phrase "I am the LORD your God". There is an element of a personal relationship being conveyed here. "I am" referring to God Himself in relation to someone else (the "your" part). And God wants this relationship to be exclusively with Him; and this is clearly the idea behind the statement: "You shall have no other gods before me." God wants every one of us to have an exclusive, close and personal relationship with Him. There can be no other "gods" between us and Him. Since it is a personal, exclusive relationship being established here, God wants our priorities straightened out right from the beginning. He wants us to obey Him first before anything or anyone else. Since He has established Himself as the Creator God, and the only one who can save us, then He wants us to look up to Him only for help, for guidance, for blessings, for protection. We do not recognize other "gods" to do these for us. When we realize that there is indeed a God, and we know we have sinned against Him, the first thing God wants us to learn is that He is the only One who can save us from death and eventually fulfil His purpose in creating us. The personal relationship between us and God should therefore come first in everything that we do. That is why the First commandment stands supreme; it sets and defines everything after it.

Primacy in Everything

If we go through the rest of the Ten Commandments, we can understand them better in the light of our understanding of the first one. For example, the second and third commandments buttress respect for, love for and worship for the one true God. We do not have idols before Him and we respect His name, not taking it in vain. We also recognize the authority of God to set times for us when we observe the fourth commandment. We further recognize His being Creator when we observe the Sabbath because it was on this day that He rested—as can be plainly seen in the creation account of Genesis. The true God rested on the Sabbath day. If we recognize the one true God as He reveals Himself in the first commandment, then we can by all means appreciate the reason for the 2nd, 3rd and 4th commandments. These laws demand that we love, that we adore, that we respect and that we worship God in the manner He has prescribed in these commandments. These laws define our relationship with God. The last 6 laws, on the other hand define

our relationship with fellow man. And yet, without the clearly established authority of God as defined by the first law, we might miss out on their proper application. If we recognize that God values parental authority by placing a command to honor them (and this comes with a promise), values the life of everyone by putting a command against murder, values the sanctity of marriage by prohibiting adultery, values the right of everyone to have property as He has blessed each one by prohibiting stealing, values the integrity of each one by barring false testimonies and values every one's security with regards to everything he has by prohibiting covetousness, THEN, our approach to these commandments would be complete fearful obedience. We recognize the One who gave these commandments in the first place. Do you think that if ordinary mortals would be giving these laws, they would have the same effect on us? Look at our society today. We have man-made laws based on the laws of God against stealing and adultery and yet many do not follow them. Why? They do not recognize or understand the implications of the first commandment. They do not know the one true God who prohibits these destructive behaviors in the first place. They merely see it as laws promulgated by human governments and by human beings.

Other Laws Enhanced by the First Commandment

Now let's go to some other laws or statutes found in the Bible and see how the first commandment enhances them. Let's go to Lev 11:44 "I am the LORD your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy. Do not make yourselves unclean by any creature that moves about on the ground." This is part of the concluding statement on the so-called food laws. But let us notice how it was stated. It begins with "I am the LORD your God." Now let's go to Lev 19:18 "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD." Notice how this statement ends with "I am the LORD". We can actually go through a lot of such places in the Bible and find the phrase "I am the LORD". If you noticed by now, this is part of the statement of the first commandment. What does this tell us? Even in the minute details of our lives—from the food that we eat to our behaviour or attitude—God is reminding us that He must be obeyed. He is referring us back to the first commandment. He is reminding us of the close, personal, exclusive relationship He wants with us. He tells us He is very much part of every aspect of our lives and so we cannot leave Him out of it. Is He overcrowding our lives? No, I don't think so. As our Creator, He knows what's good for us and what is not. He is telling us to be reliant on Him in everything so we can truly enjoy life and live it as He intended. And it is inevitable that He will instruct us how to do so by His Laws. Given these, it is just but proper that He establish His authority in our lives by laying down the first commandment. It sets everything else in order. And we should be reminded that indeed God is and should be first in our lives. It will be for the better if we do so. AG

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