



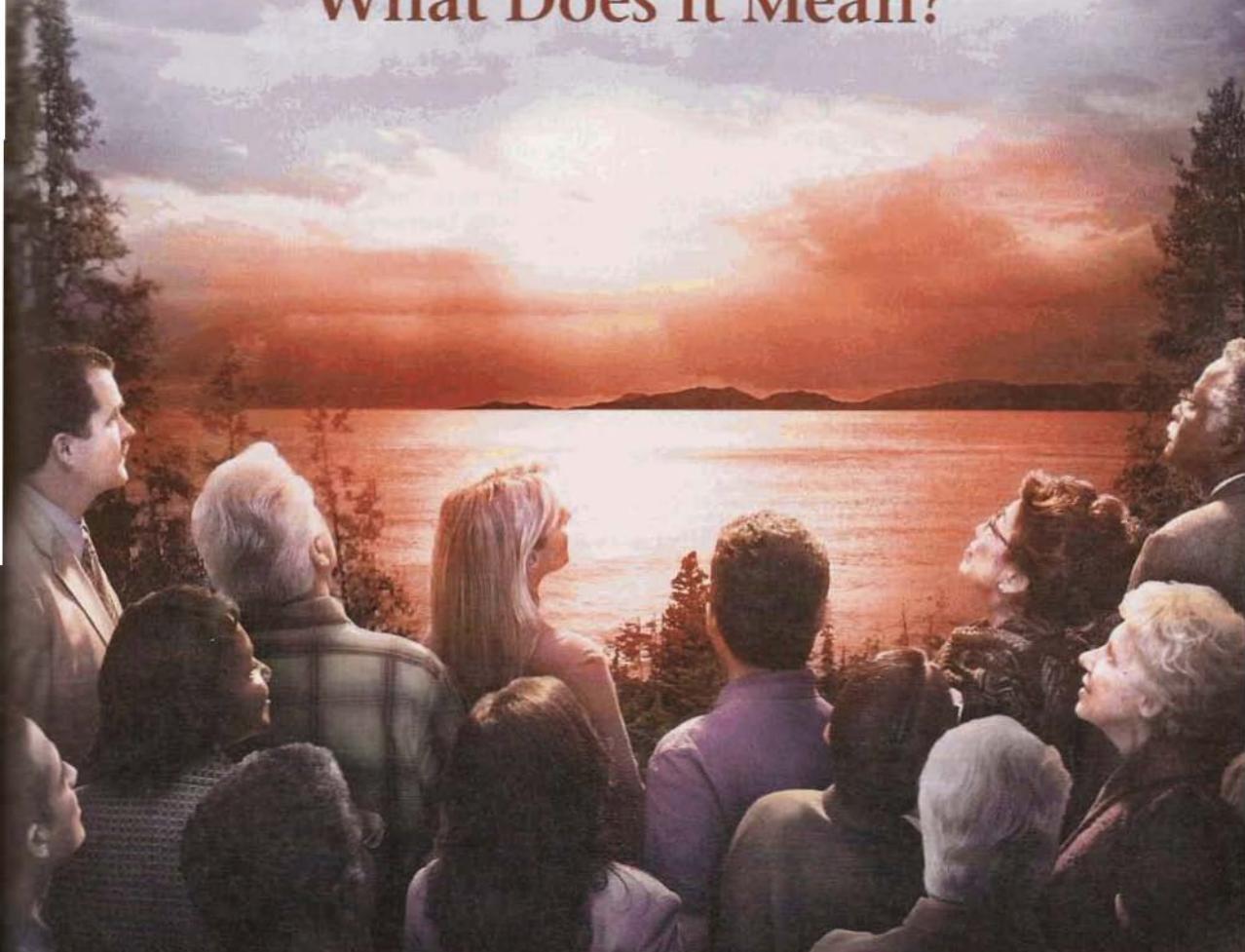
APRIL 1, 2009

THE WATCHTOWER

ANNOUNCING JEHOVAH'S KINGDOM

BORN AGAIN

What Does It Mean?



THE PURPOSE OF THIS MAGAZINE, *The Watchtower*, is to honor Jehovah God, the Supreme Ruler of the universe. Just as watchtowers in ancient times enabled a person to observe developments from afar, so this magazine shows us the significance of world events in the light of Bible prophecies. It comforts people with the good news that God's Kingdom, which is a real government in heaven, will soon bring an end to all wickedness and transform the earth into a paradise. It promotes faith in Jesus Christ, who died so that we might gain everlasting life and who is now ruling as King of God's Kingdom. This magazine has been published by Jehovah's Witnesses continuously since 1879 and is nonpolitical. It adheres to the Bible as its authority.

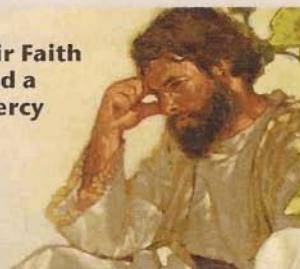
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ENGLISH

The Road to Salvation?

HOW would you answer the question, "Are you born again?" Millions of believers around the globe would answer with an emphatic, "Yes!" They believe that being born again is a mark of all true Christians and the only way to salvation. They echo the view of such religious leaders as theologian Robert C. Sproul, who wrote: "If a person is not born again, . . . then he is not a Christian."

Are you among those who believe that being born again puts you on the road to salvation? If so, you no doubt want to help your relatives and friends to find that road and to start walking on it. For them to do so, however, they need to understand the difference between an individual who is born again and someone who is not. How would you explain to them what it means to be born again?

Many believe that the expression "born again" refers to someone who makes a solemn promise to serve God and Christ and, as a result, is changed from being spiritually dead to being spiritually alive. In fact, a current dictionary defines a born-again individual as "a usually Christian person who has made a renewed or confirmed commitment of faith especially after an intense religious experience."—*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary—Eleventh Edition*.

Would you be surprised to learn that the Bible does not agree with

that definition? Would you like to know what God's Word really teaches about being born again? You will surely benefit from taking a closer look at this subject. Why? Because an accurate understanding of what it means to be born again will affect your life and your expectations for the future.

What Does the Bible Teach?

The only place in the entire Bible where the expression "born again" is found is at John 3:1-12, which describes an intriguing conversation that took place between Jesus and a religious leader in Jerusalem. You will find that Bible account quoted in full in the accompanying box. We invite you to read it carefully.

In the account, Jesus highlights several aspects of the "new birth."^{**} In fact, Jesus' discussion helps us to answer these five vital questions:

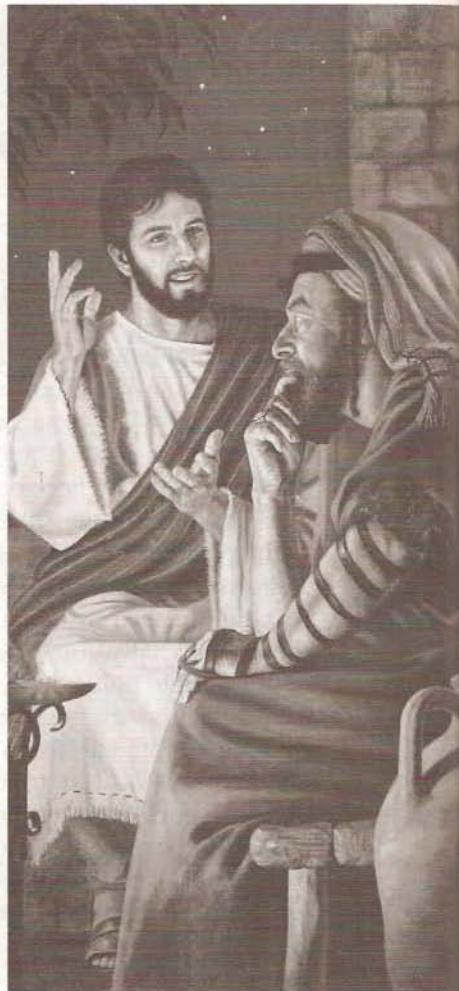
- **How important is the new birth?**
- **Is it up to us to decide to experience the new birth?**
- **What is its purpose?**
- **By what means does it take place?**
- **What change of relationship does it bring about?**

Let us consider these questions one at a time.

^{**} The term "new birth" is found at 1 Peter 1:3, 23. It is another Biblical term that describes the experience of being "born again." Both terms are derived from the Greek verb *gen-na'o*.

"You People Must Be Born Again"

"Now there was a man of the Pharisees, Nicodemus was his name, a ruler of the Jews. This one came to him in the night and said to him: 'Rabbi, we know that you as a teacher have come from God; for no one can perform these signs that you perform unless God is with him.' In answer Jesus said to him: 'Most truly I say to you, Unless anyone is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.' Nicodemus said to him: 'How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter into the womb of his mother a second time and be born, can he?' Jesus answered: 'Most truly I say to you, Unless anyone is born from water and spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. What has been born from the flesh is flesh, and what has been born from the spirit is spirit. Do not marvel because I told you, You people must be born again. The wind blows where it wants to, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from and where it is going. So is everyone that has been born from the spirit.' In answer Nicodemus said to him: 'How can these things come about?' In answer Jesus said to him: 'Are you a teacher of Israel and yet do not know these things? Most truly I say to you, What we know we speak and what we have seen we bear witness of, but you people do not receive the witness we give. If I have told you earthly things and yet you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?'"—John 3:1-12.



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¹ Audio cassettes also available.

² CD also available.

³ MP3 CD-ROM also available.

⁴ Audio recordings also available at www.jw.org.

THE NEW BIRTH

How Important?

THROUGHOUT his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus emphasized that undergoing a new birth, or being born again, is of great importance. How did he make that clear?

Note how Jesus in his discussion with Nicodemus underscored the importance of the new birth. He stated: “Unless anyone is born again, he *cannot* see the kingdom of God.” (John 3:3) The words “unless” and “cannot” highlight the necessity of the new birth. To illustrate: If someone says, “Unless the sun shines, there cannot be daylight,” he means that sunshine is absolutely necessary for daylight. In a similar manner, Jesus stated that being born again is absolutely necessary for seeing God’s Kingdom.

Finally, as if to remove any lingering doubt about the subject, Jesus stated: “You people *must* be born again.” (John 3:7) Clearly,

**“Unless the sun shines,
there cannot be
daylight”**

according to Jesus, being born again is a requirement—a must—for one to “enter into the kingdom of God.”—John 3:5.

Since Jesus viewed the new birth as a matter of such great importance, Christians should make sure that they understand this subject accurately. For example, do you think that a Christian can *choose* to be born again?

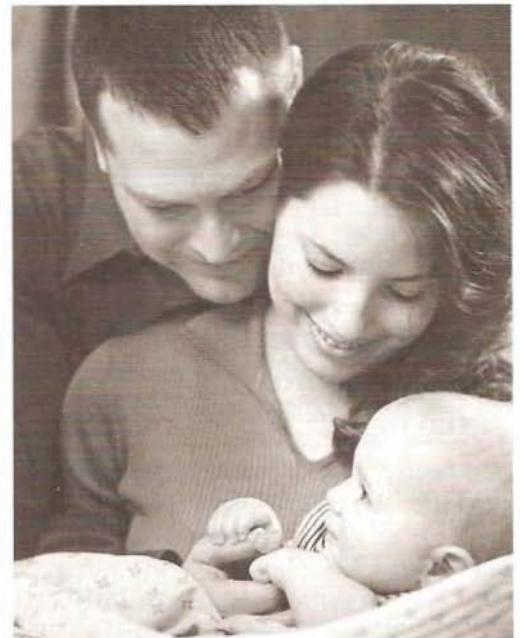
THE NEW BIRTH

A Personal Decision?

WHO causes the new birth? When exhorting their listeners to become born-again Christians, some preachers quote Jesus’ words: “You people must be born again.” (John 3:7) Such ministers use these words as a command, in effect saying, “Be born again!” They thus preach that it is up to each believer to obey Jesus and take the necessary steps to undergo the new birth. According to such reasoning, the new birth is a matter of personal choice. But is that view in harmony with what Jesus told Nicodemus?

A careful reading of Jesus’ words shows that Jesus did not teach that it is up to man to choose whether to experience the new birth or not. Why do we say this? The Greek expression translated “is born again” can also be rendered “should be born from above.”* Thus, according to that alternate rendering, the new birth originates “from above”—that is, “from heaven,”

* Several Bible translations render John 3:3 in this way. For example, *A Literal Translation of the Bible* states: “If one does not receive birth from above, he is not able to see the kingdom of God.”



What similarity is there between the new birth and a physical birth?

or "from the Father." (John 19:11; footnote; James 1:17) Yes, it is caused by God.—1 John 3:9.

If we keep the expression "from above" in mind, it is not hard to understand why an individual cannot cause his own new birth. Just think of your physical birth. Was it up to you to make the choice that led to your birth? Of course not! You were born because you were begotten by your father. Similarly, we can experience the new birth only if God, our heavenly Father, causes our new birth. (John 1:13) Thus, the apostle Peter rightly states: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for according to his great mercy *he* gave us a new birth."—1 Peter 1:3.

Is It a Command?

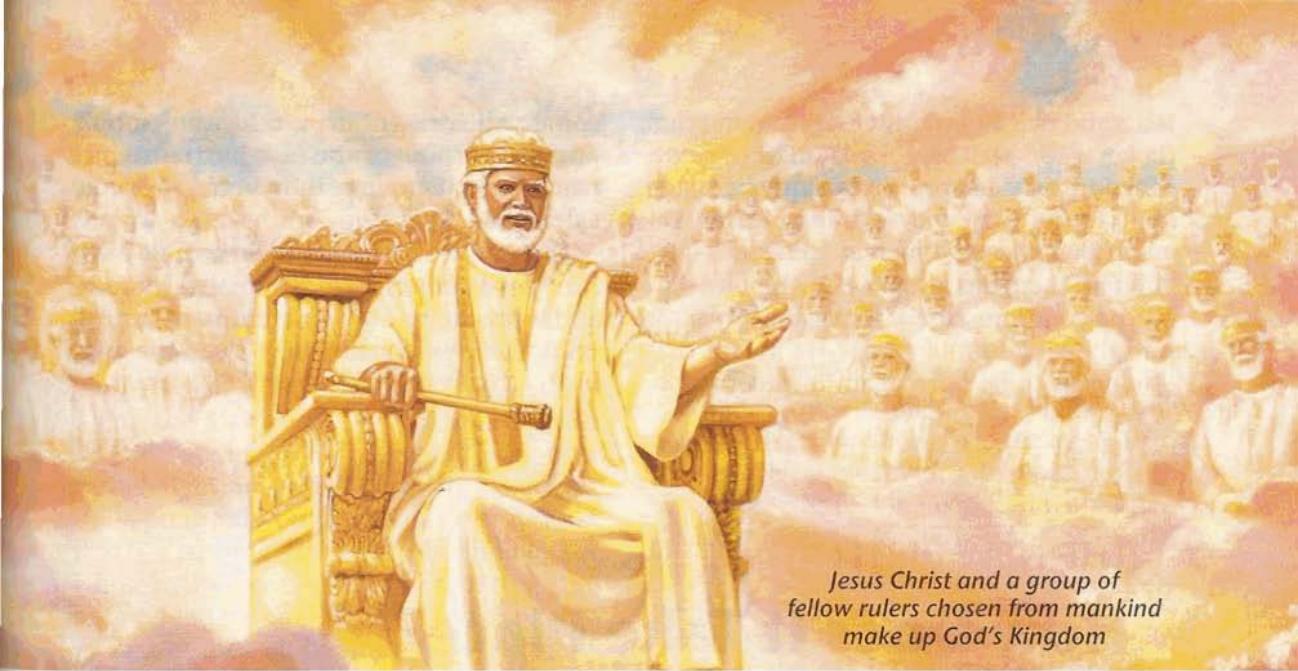
Some may wonder, though, 'If it is true that no one can decide on his own to be

born again, why did Jesus give the command: "You people must be born again"?' That is a valid question. After all, if Jesus' words do indeed constitute a command, he would be ordering us to do something beyond our control. That does not sound reasonable. Then, how should the words you must be "born again" be understood?

A closer look at that phrase in its original language shows that it is not rendered in the imperative mood, or in the form of a command. Rather, the phrase is rendered in the form of a statement. In other words, when Jesus said you must be "born again," he was stating a fact, not giving a command. He said: "It is necessary for you to be born from above."—John 3:7, *Modern Young's Literal Translation*.

To illustrate this matter of command versus statement of fact, think of a comparison. Picture a city that has several schools. One of them is set aside as a school for students belonging to a native, or indigenous, population living in an area far from that city. One day, a young man who does not belong to that native group tells the principal of that school, "I want to enroll in your school." The principal tells him, "To enroll, you must be a native." Of course, the principal's words are not a command. He is not ordering the student, "Be a native!" The principal simply states the fact—the requirement for attending that school. Similarly, when Jesus said: "You people must be born again," he was simply stating a fact—the requirement for one to "enter into the kingdom of God."

That last thought—the Kingdom of God—has a bearing on yet another aspect of the new birth. It concerns the question, What is its purpose? Knowing the answer to that question is a key to understanding accurately what it means to be born again.



Jesus Christ and a group of fellow rulers chosen from mankind make up God's Kingdom

THE NEW BIRTH

What Is Its Purpose?

MANY believe that one needs to be born again to receive eternal salvation. Note, though, what Jesus himself said about the purpose of the new birth. He stated: "Unless anyone is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." (John 3:3) Thus, one needs to be born again in order to enter into God's Kingdom, not in order to receive salvation. 'But,' some may say, 'are not these two expressions—entering the Kingdom and receiving salvation—referring to the same reward?' No, they are not. To understand the difference, let us consider first the meaning of the expression "kingdom of God."

A kingdom is a form of government. So, then, the expression "kingdom of God" means "government of God." The Bible teaches that Jesus Christ, the "son of man," is the King of God's Kingdom and that Christ has fellow rulers. (Daniel 7:1, 13, 14;

Matthew 26:63, 64) Furthermore, a vision given to the apostle John disclosed that Christ's fellow rulers are individuals chosen "out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation" and will "rule as kings over the earth." (Revelation 5:9, 10; 20:6) God's Word further reveals that those who will rule as kings form a "little flock" of 144,000 individuals "who have been bought from the earth."—Luke 12:32; Revelation 14:1, 3.

Where is the seat of God's Kingdom? "The kingdom of God" is also called "the kingdom of the heavens," which shows that

The purpose of the new birth is to prepare a limited group of humans for heavenly rulership

Jesus and his fellow kings rule from heaven. (Luke 8:10; Matthew 13:11) Thus, God's Kingdom is a heavenly government made up of Jesus Christ and a group of fellow rulers chosen from among mankind.

What, then, did Jesus mean when he stated that one must be born again to "enter into the kingdom of God"? He meant that one needs to be born again in order to be-

come a ruler with Christ in heaven. Simply put, the purpose of the new birth is to prepare a limited group of humans for heavenly rulership.

Thus far, we have seen that the new birth is of great importance, is initiated by God, and is preparing a group of humans for rulership in heaven. But how does the new birth actually take place?

THE NEW BIRTH

How Does It Take Place?

JESUS spoke with Nicodemus not only about the importance, cause, and purpose of the new birth but also about the means by which the new birth occurs. Jesus said: "Unless anyone is born from water and spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." (John 3:5) Thus, a person is born again by means of water and spirit. But to what does the expression "water and spirit" refer?

"Water and Spirit"—What Are They?

Being a Jewish religious scholar, Nicodemus was no doubt familiar with the way that the Hebrew Scriptures use the term "spirit of God"—God's active force, which can influence people to perform special feats. (Genesis 41:38; Exodus 31:3; 1 Samuel 10:6) So when Jesus used the word "spirit," Nicodemus would have understood it to be the holy spirit, the active force of God.

What about Jesus' reference to water? Consider the events that are recorded immediately before and after the conversation with Nicodemus. These show that both John the Baptizer and Jesus' disciples were

performing baptisms in water. (John 1:19, 31; 3:22; 4:1-3) This practice became well-known in Jerusalem. Therefore, when Jesus spoke about water, Nicodemus would have discerned that Jesus was referring, not to water in general, but to the water of baptism.*

Baptized "With Holy Spirit"

If being "born from water" relates to being baptized in water, what does it mean to be "born from . . . spirit"? Before Nicodemus' conversation with Jesus, John the Baptizer had announced that not only water but also spirit would play a role in baptism. He said: "I baptized you with water, but he [Jesus] will baptize you with holy spirit." (Mark 1:7, 8) Gospel writer Mark describes the first time that such a baptism took place. He writes: "In the course of those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan by John. And immediately on coming up out of the water he saw the heavens being parted, and, like a dove, the

* In a similar way, the apostle Peter once said at an occasion of baptism: "Can anyone forbid water?"—Acts 10:47.

spirit coming down upon him." (Mark 1:9, 10) When Jesus was immersed in the Jordan, he was baptized with water. At the moment that he received the spirit from heaven, he was baptized with holy spirit.

About three years after his baptism, Jesus assured his disciples: "You will be baptized in holy spirit not many days after this." (Acts 1:5) When did that occur?

On the day of Pentecost in the year 33 C.E., about 120 disciples of Jesus were gathered in a home in Jerusalem. "Suddenly there occurred from heaven a noise just like that of a rushing stiff breeze, and it filled the whole house in which they were sitting. And tongues as if of fire became visible to them . . . , and they all became filled with holy spirit." (Acts 2:1-4) That same day, others in Jerusalem were urged to get baptized in water. The apostle Peter told a crowd: "Repent,

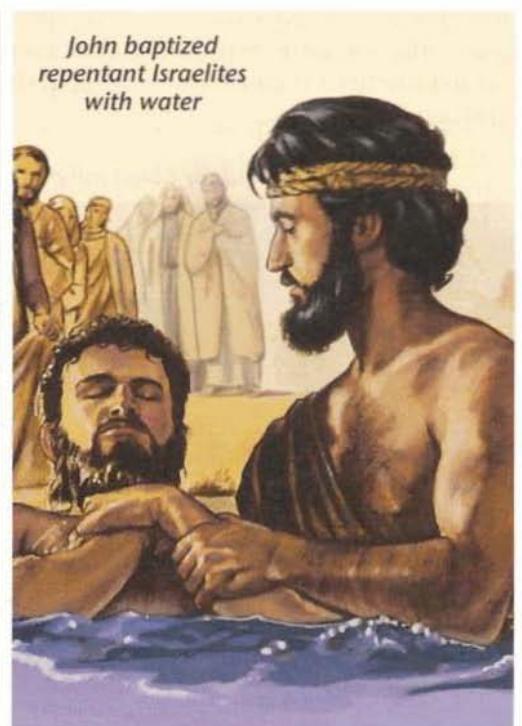
and let each one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the free gift of the holy spirit." What was the reaction? "Those who embraced his word heartily were baptized, and on that day about three thousand souls were added."—Acts 2:38, 41.

A Twofold Process

What do these baptisms reveal about the new birth? They show that the new birth takes place by means of a twofold process. Note that Jesus first got baptized with water. Then he received the holy spirit. Similarly, the early disciples had first been baptized in water (some by John the Baptizer), and then they received the holy spirit. (John 1:26-36) Likewise, the 3,000 converts were first baptized with water, and then they received the holy spirit.

Keeping in mind the baptisms that occurred on Pentecost 33 C.E., how should we expect the new birth to take place today? In the same way that it occurred in the case of Jesus' apostles and early disciples. First, a person repents of his sins, turns away from a wrong course, dedicates his life to Jehovah to worship and serve him, and makes his dedication public by water baptism. Then, if God chooses him to serve as a ruler in His Kingdom, he is anointed with holy spirit. The first part of this twofold process (baptism with water) is initiated by the individual; the second part (baptism with spirit) is initiated by God. When a person undergoes both baptisms, he has experienced the new birth.

Why, though, did Jesus in his conversation with Nicodemus use the expression "*born* from water and spirit"? To underline that those baptized with water and spirit would undergo a remarkable change. The next article considers that aspect of the new birth.



What Does It Accomplish?

WHY did Jesus use the expression “born . . . from spirit” when speaking about the baptism with holy spirit? (John 3:5) When used as a figure of speech, the word “birth” means “beginning,” such as in the expression “the birth of a nation.” Hence, the term “new birth” indicates a “new beginning.” Therefore, the figures of speech “born” and “new birth” highlight that there will be a new beginning in the relationship between God and those who are baptized with holy spirit. How does that complete change in relationship occur?

In explaining how God prepares humans for rulership in heaven, the apostle Paul used an illustration taken from family life. He wrote to Christians in his day that they would experience an “adoption as sons” and that God, therefore, could deal with them “as with sons.” (Galatians 4:5; Hebrews 12:7)

To see how the example of adoption helps one to understand what sort of change takes place when an individual is baptized with holy spirit, consider once more the illustration of the young man who wants to enroll in a school for students who belong to a native population.

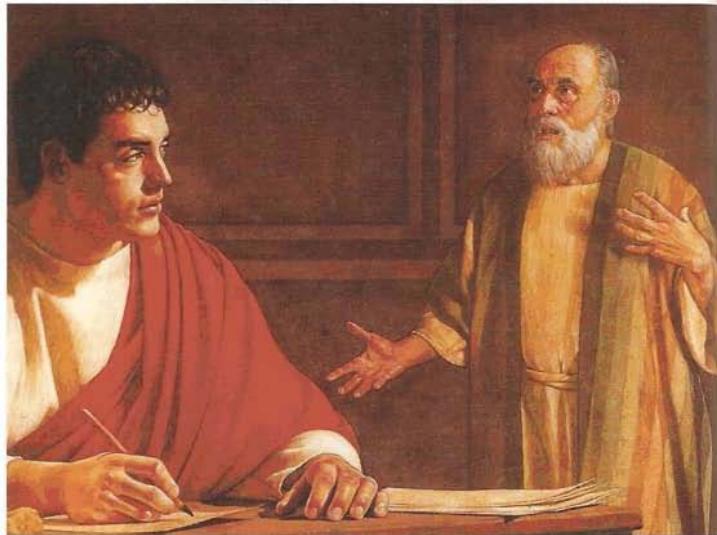
A Change Caused by Adoption

In the illustration, the young man is unable to enroll in the school because he is not a member of the indigenous population. Now, imagine that one day, a big change occurs. He is legally adopted by a father of an indigenous family. How does that affect the young man? Well, be-

cause of being adopted as a son, he may now have the same rights as other indigenous youths—including the right to enroll in the school. The adoption has completely changed his prospects.

This illustrates what happens in a much more significant manner to those who experience the new birth. Consider some similarities. The young man in the illustration will be given a place in school but only if he meets the requirement for admission—that of belonging to the native population. Yet, on his own he cannot meet that requirement. Similarly, some humans will be given a place in God’s Kingdom, or heavenly government, but only if they meet the requirement for admission—that of being “born again.” Yet, on their own they cannot meet that requirement because the new birth depends on God.

What did Paul say about adoption?



What changed the condition of the young man? The legal process of adoption. Of course, that process did not change the young man's nature. After his adoption, he was still the same person. Even so, after the legal requirements for adoption had been met, the young man received a new status. Indeed, he experienced a new beginning—a new birth, so to speak. He became a son, which gave him the right to attend the school and to be part of his adoptive father's family.

Similarly, Jehovah changed the condition of a group of imperfect humans by initiating a legal procedure to adopt them as his children. The apostle Paul, who belonged to that group, wrote to fellow believers: "You received a spirit of adoption as sons, by which spirit we cry out: 'Abba, Father!' The spirit itself bears witness with our spirit that we are God's children." (Romans 8:15, 16) Yes, through the process of adoption, those Christians had become part of God's family, or "children of God."—1 John 3:1; 2 Corinthians 6:18.

Of course, that adoption by God did not change the nature of the adoptees, for they remained imperfect. (1 John 1:8) Neverthe-

less, as Paul further explained, after the legal requirements for adoption had been met, they received a new status. At the same time, God's spirit implanted in those adopted sons the conviction that they would live with Christ in heaven. (1 John 3:2) That unmistakable conviction caused by holy spirit gave them a whole new outlook on life. (2 Corinthians 1:21, 22) Yes, they experienced a new beginning—a new birth, as it were.

Speaking about God's adopted sons, the Bible states: "They will be priests of God and of the Christ, and will rule as kings with him for the thousand years." (Revelation 20:6) With Christ, God's adopted sons will receive a place as kings in God's Kingdom, or heavenly government. The apostle Peter told fellow believers that they would receive "an incorruptible and undefiled and unfading inheritance" that is "reserved in the heavens" for them. (1 Peter 1:3, 4) A precious inheritance indeed!

However, this matter of rulership also raises a question. If those who are born again will rule as kings in heaven, over whom will they be ruling? That question will be considered in the following article.

Rulership for Some, Benefits for Many

SINCE the days of the apostles, God has been choosing from among mankind a limited number of faithful Christians, adopting them as sons. The change that these adopted sons experience is so complete that God's Word describes it as a new birth. The purpose of the new birth is to prepare such born-again servants of God to become rulers in heaven. (2 Timothy 2:12) To become rul-

ers, they are raised out of death to heavenly life. (Romans 6:3-5) In heaven, "they are to rule as kings over the earth" along with Christ.—Revelation 5:10; 11:15.

However, God's Word also states that others besides those who are born again will receive everlasting salvation. In the Bible (in the Hebrew Scriptures as well as in the Christian Greek Scriptures), mention is

made of the fact that God purposed to save two groups of people—a comparatively small group of rulers living in heaven and a large group of subjects living on earth. Note, for example, what the apostle John wrote to fellow believers who had experienced the new birth. He stated regarding Jesus: “He is a propitiatory sacrifice for our sins, yet not for ours [the small group] only but also for the whole world’s [the large group].”—1 John 2:2.

Similarly, the apostle Paul wrote: “The eager expectation of the creation [the large group] is waiting for the revealing of the sons of God [the small group].” (Romans 8:19-21) How should these words of the apostles John and Paul be understood? In this way: Those who are born again will become part of a government in heaven. For what purpose? To bring everlasting benefits to untold millions of people, subjects of God’s government who will be living on earth. Therefore, Jesus taught his disciples to pray: “Let your kingdom come. Let your will take place, as *in heaven*, also *upon earth*.”—Matthew 6:10.

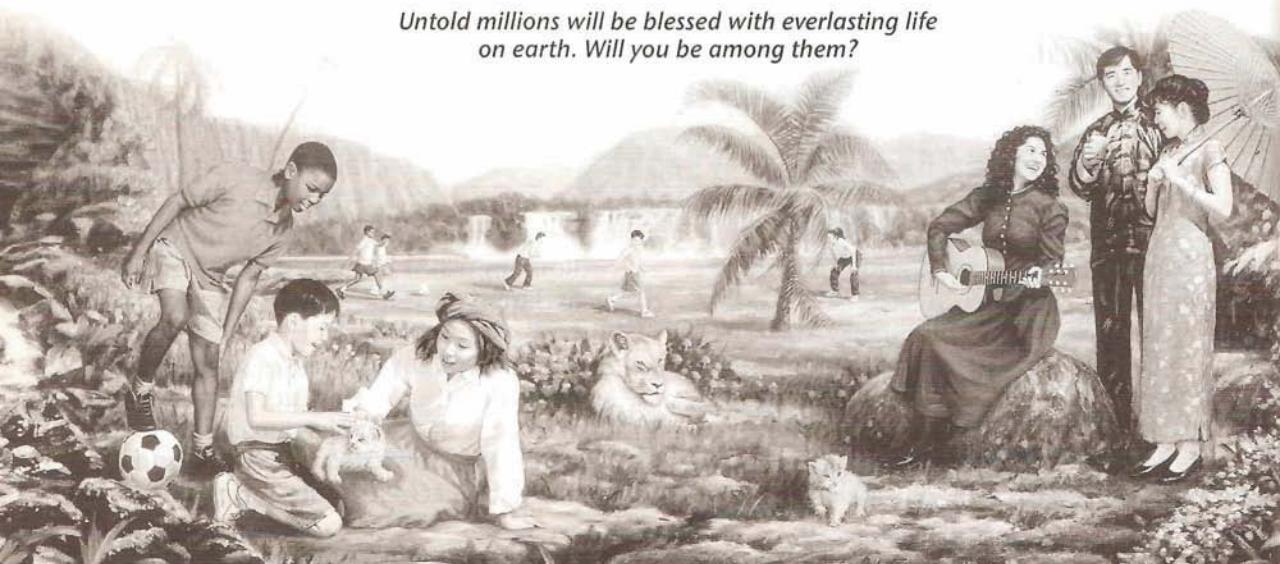
This same truth regarding salvation being extended to two groups is also found in the

Hebrew Scriptures. Note, for instance, what Jehovah told Jesus’ forefather Abraham: “By means of your seed [the small group] all nations of the earth [the large group] will certainly bless themselves.” (Genesis 22:18) Yes, blessings were to be made available to all nations through Abraham’s “seed.”

Who is that “seed”? Jesus Christ, joined by those who experienced the new birth, the adopted sons of God. The apostle Paul explains: “If you belong to Christ, you are really Abraham’s seed.” (Galatians 3:16, 29) And what are the blessings that come to people of all nations through the “seed”? The privilege of being restored to God’s favor and enjoying life without end on a paradise earth. The psalmist David prophesied: “The righteous themselves will possess the earth, and they will reside forever upon it.”—Psalm 37:29; Isaiah 45:18; Revelation 21:1-5.

Indeed, rulership in heaven is set aside for some, but the benefits of heavenly rulership—everlasting life on earth and all its accompanying blessings—are extended to many. May you and your family be among those who will reap the everlasting benefits that God’s Kingdom will bring.

*Untold millions will be blessed with everlasting life
on earth. Will you be among them?*



Did You Know?

Why did Jesus in prayer address Jehovah as "Abba, Father"?

The Aramaic word 'ab-ba' can mean either "the father" or "O Father." On each of the three occasions that the expression appears in the Scriptures, it is part of a prayer and is used with reference to the heavenly Father, Jehovah. What significance does the word carry?

The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia states: "In the colloquial speech of Jesus' time, 'abbā' was primarily used as a term of informal intimacy and respect by children of their fathers." It was an endearing form of address and among the first words that a child learned. Jesus used the expression in a particularly fervent appeal to his Father. In the garden of Gethsemane, just hours before his death, Jesus in prayer addressed Jehovah with the words "Abba, Father."—Mark 14:36.

"*'Abbā'* as a form of address to God is extremely uncommon in Jewish literature of the Greco-Roman period, doubtless because it would have appeared irreverent to address God with this familiar term," continues the above-mentioned reference work. However, "Jesus'... use of this

term in prayer is an indirect attestation of His extraordinary claim to intimacy with God." The other two Scriptural occurrences of "Abba"—both in the writings of the apostle Paul—indicate that first-century Christians also used it in their prayers.—Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:6.

Why was part of the Bible written in Greek?

"The sacred pronouncements of God" were entrusted to the Jews, stated the apostle Paul. (Romans 3:1, 2) Hence, the first part of the Bible was written mostly in Hebrew, the Jews' language. Yet, the Christian Scriptures were written in Greek.* Why so?

In the fourth century B.C.E., the soldiers who served under Alexander the Great spoke various dialects of classical Greek, which were in the process of being blended to form Koine, or common Greek. Alexander's conquests contributed to Koine becoming the international language of the day. By the time of those conquests, the Jews had become widely dis-

* Brief portions of the Hebrew Scriptures were written in Aramaic. The Gospel of Matthew was apparently first written in Hebrew and then may have been translated into Greek by Matthew himself.



Courtesy of Israel Antiquities Authority

persed. Many never returned to Palestine from their Babylonian exile, which had ended centuries earlier. As a result, many of the Jews eventually lost their grasp of pure Hebrew and used Greek instead. (Acts 6:1) For their benefit, the *Septuagint*, a Koine, or common Greek, translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, was produced.

The *Dictionnaire de la Bible* notes that no other language had "the richness, the flexibility, and the universal and international character of Greek." With its extensive and exact vocabulary, detailed grammar, and verbs that aptly expressed subtle shades of meaning, it was "a language of communication, of circulation, of propagation—precisely the language needed by Christianity." Is it not fitting that Greek was the language in which the Christian message was penned?

He Learned a Lesson in Mercy



JONAH would have plenty of time to think. Before him lay a journey of more than 500 miles, an overland trek that would take him about a month, perhaps even longer. To begin, he had to choose between the shorter routes and the safer ones and then steadily make his way through valleys and over mountain passes beyond counting. He had to skirt the vast Syrian Desert, ford such rivers as the mighty Euphrates, and seek shelter among foreigners in the towns and villages of Syria, Mesopotamia, and Assyria. As the days passed, he thought about the destination that he so dreaded, the city that drew closer with each step he took—Nineveh.

One thing Jonah knew for certain: He could not turn around and run away from this assignment. He had tried that before. When Jehovah first commissioned him to go and deliver a message of judgment to this mighty Assyrian stronghold, Jonah promptly boarded a ship sailing in the opposite direction. Jehovah then sent a great tempest, and Jonah soon saw that his rebellion was about to cost the lives of everyone on board. To save those brave mariners, he told them to throw him overboard. Reluctantly, they did, and Jonah thought his death was certain. However, Jehovah sent a huge fish to swallow Jonah and deliver him unharmed on the shore some three days later, an awed

and more compliant man.*—Jonah, chapters 1, 2.

When Jehovah ordered Jonah to Nineveh the second time, the prophet obediently headed east on this long journey. (Jonah 3: 1-3) However, had he allowed Jehovah's discipline to work a thorough change in him? For instance, Jehovah had shown him mercy, saving him from drowning, holding back punishment for his rebellion, and giving him a second chance to carry out this assignment. After all of this, had Jonah learned to show mercy to others? Mercy is a lesson that is often difficult for imperfect humans to learn. Let us see what we can gather from Jonah's struggle.

A Message of Judgment and a Surprising Response

Jonah did not see Nineveh as Jehovah did. We read: "Now Nineveh herself proved to be a city great to God." (Jonah 3:3) Three times, the record of Jonah quotes Jehovah as referring to "Nineveh the great city." (Jonah 1:2; 3:2; 4:11) Why was this city great, or important, to Jehovah?

Nineveh was ancient, being among the first cities that Nimrod established after the Flood. It was vast, a metropolitan region that evidently included several other cities, requiring a man three days to walk from one end to the other. (Genesis 10:11; Jonah

* See the article "Imitate Their Faith—He Learned From His Mistakes," in the January 1, 2009, issue of *The Watchtower*.

3:3) Nineveh was evidently impressive, with stately temples, mighty walls, and other edifices. But none of these factors made the city important to Jehovah God. What mattered to him were the people. Nineveh had a huge population for that time. For all their badness, Jehovah cared about them. He values human life and the potential that each individual has for repenting and learning to do what is right.

When Jonah finally entered Nineveh, its immense population of more than 120,000 may have made the place only more intimidating.* He walked for a day, penetrating ever deeper into that teeming metropolis, perhaps looking for a suitable central location to start spreading his message. How would he reach these people? Had he learned to speak the Assyrian tongue? Or did Jehovah grant him that ability through a miracle? We do not know. It may be that Jonah made his proclamation in his native Hebrew and used an interpreter to relate it to the Ninevites. At any rate, his message was simple and not likely to win him any favor: "Only forty days more, and Nineveh will be overthrown." (Jonah 3:4) He spoke out boldly and repeatedly. In doing so, he showed remarkable courage and faith, qualities that Christians need today more than ever.

Jonah got the Ninevites' attention. No doubt he braced himself for a hostile and violent response. Instead, something remarkable happened. People listened! His words spread like wildfire. Before long, the whole city was talking about Jonah's prophecy of doom. Jonah's account tells us: "The men of Nineveh began to put faith in God, and they

proceeded to proclaim a fast and to put on sackcloth, from the greatest one of them even to the least one of them." (Jonah 3:5) Rich and poor, strong and weak, young and old were all caught up in the same repentant spirit. News of this popular movement soon reached the ears of the king.

The king too was struck with godly fear. He rose up from his throne, removed his luxurious robes of state, put on the same rough clothing that his people were wearing, and even "sat down in the ashes." With his "great ones," or nobles, he issued a decree turning the fast from a spontaneous popular movement into an official action of state. He ordered that all wear sackcloth, even the domestic animals.* He humbly acknowledged that his people were guilty of badness and violence. He also expressed hope that the true God would soften upon seeing their repentance, saying: "God may . . . turn back from his burning anger, so that we may not perish."—Jonah 3:6-9.

Some critics express doubts that such a change of heart could have occurred so quickly among the Ninevites. However, Bible scholars have noted that a movement of that kind was not out of keeping with the superstitious and volatile nature of people of such cultures in ancient times. At any rate, Jesus Christ himself later referred to the repentance of the Ninevites. (Matthew 12:41) He knew what he was talking about, for he had been alive in heaven to witness those events as they unfolded. (John 8:57, 58) How, though, did Jehovah react to the Ninevites' repentance?

* It has been estimated that Samaria, the capital of Israel, may have had some 20,000 to 30,000 inhabitants in Jonah's day—less than a fourth of Nineveh's population. In its heyday, Nineveh may have been the largest city in the world.

* This detail may seem odd, but it is not without precedent in ancient times. Greek historian Herodotus noted that the ancient Persians grieved over the death of a popular general by including their livestock in the customs of mourning.



A Contrast Between Divine Mercy and Human Rigidity

Jonah later wrote: "The true God got to see their works, that they had turned back from their bad way; and so the true God felt regret over the calamity that he had spoken of causing to them; and he did not cause it."—Jonah 3:10.

Does this mean that Jehovah decided that his own judgment about Nineveh had been in error? No. The Bible says of Jehovah: "Perfect is his activity, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness, with whom there is no injustice." (Deuteronomy 32:4) Jehovah's righteous anger against Nineveh simply abated. He observed the change in those people and saw that the punishment he had intended to bring upon them would no longer be fitting. This was an occasion to show divine mercy.

Jehovah is nothing like the rigid, cold, even harsh God so often portrayed by religious leaders. On the contrary, he is reasonable, adaptable, and merciful. When he determines to bring punishment upon

the wicked, he first uses his representatives on earth to issue warnings, for he is eager to see the wicked do what the Ninevites did—repent and change their ways. (Ezekiel 33:11) Jehovah told his prophet Jeremiah: "At any moment that I may speak against a nation and against a kingdom to uproot it and to pull it down and to destroy it, and that nation actually turns back from its badness against which I spoke, I will also feel regret over the calamity that I had thought to execute upon it."—Jeremiah 18:7, 8.

So was Jonah's prophecy a false one? No; it fulfilled its purpose as a warning. That warning was based on the Ninevites' bad ways, which subsequently changed. Should the Ninevites resume their wicked ways, God's judgment would be upon them. That is exactly what happened later on.—Zephaniah 2:13-15.

How did Jonah react when destruction did not come at the time he expected it to? We read: "To Jonah, though, it was highly displeasing, and he got to be hot with anger." (Jonah 4:1) Jonah even uttered

God is
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did



a prayer that sounds like a rebuke of the Almighty! Jonah suggested that he should have stayed home, on his own ground. He claimed that he knew all along that Jehovah would not bring calamity on Nineveh, even using that as an excuse for his running away to Tarshish in the first place. Then he asked to die, saying that death would be better than life.—Jonah 4:2, 3.

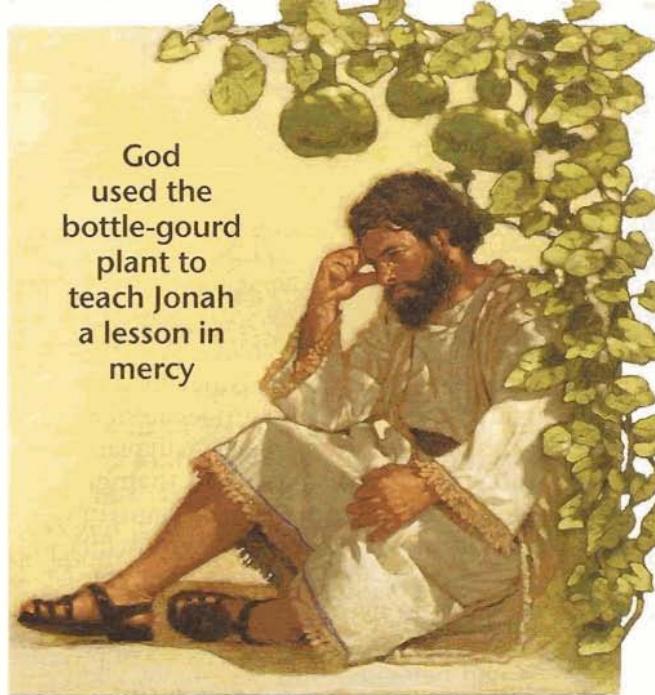
What was troubling Jonah? We cannot know all that went through his mind, but we do know that Jonah had proclaimed doom to Nineveh before all those people. They had believed him. And now, no doom was coming. Did he fear being ridiculed or being labeled a false prophet? Whatever the case, he did not rejoice over the people's repentance or over Jehovah's mercy. Instead, it seems, he was on a downward spiral into a mire of bitterness, self-pity, and wounded pride. Evidently, though, Jonah's merciful God still saw good in this distressed man. Instead of punishing Jonah for his disrespect, Jehovah simply asked him one gentle, probing question: "Have you rightly become hot with anger?" (Jonah 4:4) Did Jonah even answer? The Bible record is silent.

How Jehovah Taught Jonah a Lesson

The despondent prophet left Nineveh and headed, not home, but eastward, where some mountains overlooked the region. He built a little shelter and settled in to wait and watch Nineveh. Perhaps he still clung to the hope of witnessing her destruction. How would Jehovah teach this hardheaded man to be merciful?

Overnight, Jehovah caused a bottle-gourd plant to sprout up. Jonah woke to see this luxuriant growth, with its broad leaves providing far more shade than his flimsy shelter ever could. His spirits lifted. "Jonah began to rejoice greatly" over the plant, perhaps viewing its miraculous appearance as a sign of

God used the bottle-gourd plant to teach Jonah a lesson in mercy



God's blessing and approval. However, Jehovah wanted to do more for Jonah than simply deliver him from the heat and from his own petulant anger. He wanted to reach Jonah's heart. So God used a worm to attack and kill the plant. Then he sent "a parching east wind" until Jonah began "swooning away" from the heat. Again the man's spirits plummeted, and he asked God that he might die.—Jonah 4:6-8.

Once again Jehovah asked Jonah if he was rightly angry, this time over the death of the bottle-gourd plant. Instead of repenting, Jonah justified himself, saying: "I have rightly become hot with anger, to the point of death." The stage was now set for Jehovah to drive home the lesson.—Jonah 4:9.

God reasoned with Jonah, saying that the prophet was feeling sorry over the death of a mere plant that had grown up overnight, one that Jonah neither planted nor caused to grow. Then God concluded: "For my part, ought I not to feel sorry for Nineveh the great city, in which there exist more than one hundred and twenty thousand men who do not

at all know the difference between their right hand and their left, besides many domestic animals?"—Jonah 4:10, 11.*

Do you see the depth of Jehovah's object lesson? Jonah had never done a thing to take care of that plant. Jehovah, on the other hand, was the Source of life for those Ninevites and had sustained them as he does all creatures on earth. How could Jonah place more value on a single plant than he did on the lives of 120,000 humans, in addition to all their livestock? Was it not because Jonah had allowed his thinking to become selfish? After all, he felt sorry for the plant only because it had benefited him personally. Did not his anger over Nineveh spring from motives that were likewise selfish—a prideful desire to save face, to be proved right?

A profound lesson indeed! The question is, Did Jonah take the lesson to heart? The book bearing his name ends with Jehovah's question hanging there, in effect, still echoing. Some critics might complain that Jonah never answers. In truth, though, his answer is there. It is the book itself. You see, evidence indicates that Jonah wrote the book bearing his name. Just imagine that prophet, once again safe in his homeland, writing this account. We can almost picture an older, wiser, humbler man ruefully shaking his head as he describes his own mistakes, his rebellion, and his stubborn refusal to show mercy. Clearly, Jonah did learn from Jehovah's wise instruction. He learned to be merciful. Will we?

* God's saying that those people did not know right from left suggested their childlike ignorance of divine standards.

IS JESUS GOD?

MANY people view the Trinity as "the central doctrine of the Christian religion." According to this teaching, the Father, Son, and holy spirit are three persons in one God. Cardinal John O'Connor stated about the Trinity: "We know that it is a very profound mystery, which we don't begin to understand." Why is the Trinity so difficult to understand?

The Illustrated Bible Dictionary gives one reason. Speaking of the Trinity, this publication admits: "It is not a biblical doctrine in the sense that any formulation of it can be found in the Bible." Because the Trinity is "not a biblical doctrine," Trinitarians have been desperately looking for Bible texts—even twisting them—to find support for their teaching.

A Text That Teaches the Trinity?

One example of a Bible verse that is often misused is John 1:1. In the *King James Version*, that verse reads: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God [Greek, *ton the-on'*], and the Word was God [*the-os'*]."¹ This verse contains two forms of the Greek noun *the-os'* (god). The first is preceded by *ton* (the), a form of the Greek definite article, and in this case the word *the-on'* refers to Almighty God. In the second instance, however, *the-os'* has no definite article. Was the article mistakenly left out?

The Gospel of John was written in Koine, or common Greek, which has specific rules regarding the use of the definite article. Bible scholar A. T. Robertson recognizes that

Why is the Trinity doctrine so difficult to understand?

if both subject and predicate have articles, "both are definite, treated as identical, one and the same, and interchangeable." Robertson considers as an example Matthew 13:38, which reads: "The field [Greek, *ho a-gros*] is the world [Greek, *ho ko'smos*.]" The grammar enables us to understand that the world is also the field.

What, though, if the subject has a definite article but the predicate does not, as in John 1:1? Citing that verse as an example, scholar James Allen Hewett emphasizes: "In such a construction the subject and predicate are not the same, equal, identical, or anything of the sort."

To illustrate, Hewett uses 1 John 1:5, which says: "God is light." In Greek, "God" is *ho the-os'* and therefore has a definite article. But *phos* for "light" is not preceded by any article. Hewett points out: "One can always . . . say of God He is characterized by light; one cannot always say of light that it is God." Similar examples are found at John 4:24, "God is a Spirit," and at 1 John 4:16, "God is love." In both of these verses, the subjects have definite articles but the predicates, "Spirit" and "love," do not. So the subjects and predicates are not interchangeable. These verses cannot mean that "Spirit is God" or "love is God."

Identity of "the Word"?

Many Greek scholars and Bible translators acknowledge that John 1:1 highlights, not the identity, but a quality of "the Word." Says Bible translator William Barclay: "Be-

cause [the apostle John] has no definite article in front of *theos* it becomes a description . . . John is not here identifying the Word with God. To put it very simply, he does not say that Jesus was God." Scholar Jason David BeDuhn likewise says: "In Greek, if you leave off the article from *theos* in a sentence like the one in John 1:1c, then your readers will assume you mean 'a god.' . . . Its absence makes *theos* quite different than the definite *ho theos*, as different as 'a god' is from 'God' in English." BeDuhn adds: "In John 1:1, the Word is not the one-and-only God, but is *a* god, or divine being." Or to put it in the words of Joseph Henry Thayer, a scholar who worked on the *American Standard Version*: "The Logos [or, Word] was divine, not the divine Being himself."

Does the identity of God have to be "a very profound mystery"? It did not seem so to Jesus. In his prayer to his Father, Jesus made a clear distinction between him and his Father when he said: "This means everlasting life, their taking in knowledge of you, the *only* true God, and of the one whom you sent forth, Jesus Christ." (John 17:3) If we believe Jesus and understand the plain teaching of the Bible, we will respect him as the divine Son of God that he is. We will also worship Jehovah as "the only true God."

**Jesus made
a clear
distinction
between
him and
his Father**

EVEN IN A DEAD LANGUAGE THE BIBLE IS ALIVE

OVER the past few centuries, at least half of the world's languages have disappeared. A language dies when it no longer has native speakers. In that sense, Latin is usually defined as "a dead language," even though it is widely studied and remains the official tongue of Vatican City.

Latin is also the language of some of the first and foremost Bible translations. Could such renderings into an obsolete tongue be "alive" today, affecting Bible readers now? The fascinating history of such translations helps to answer that question.

The Oldest Latin Translations

Latin was the first language of Rome. When the apostle Paul wrote to the Christian community in that city, though, he wrote in Greek.* That did not present a problem, as it was common for people there to speak both languages. Because many of Rome's inhabitants came from the Greek Orient, it was said that the city was becoming Greek. The linguistic situation of the Roman Empire differed from region to region, but as the empire grew, so did the importance of Latin. As a result, the Holy Scriptures were translated from Greek into Latin. This process seems to have begun in the second century C.E. in North Africa.

The various texts that were produced are known as the *Vetus Latina*, or the Old Latin

version. No ancient manuscript containing a complete Latin translation of the Scriptures has come down to us. The parts that have survived as well as the parts quoted by ancient writers seem to indicate that the *Vetus Latina* was not a single, united piece of work. Rather, it was apparently produced by several translators who worked separately at different times and places. So instead of being a single text, it is more precisely a collection of translations from the Greek.

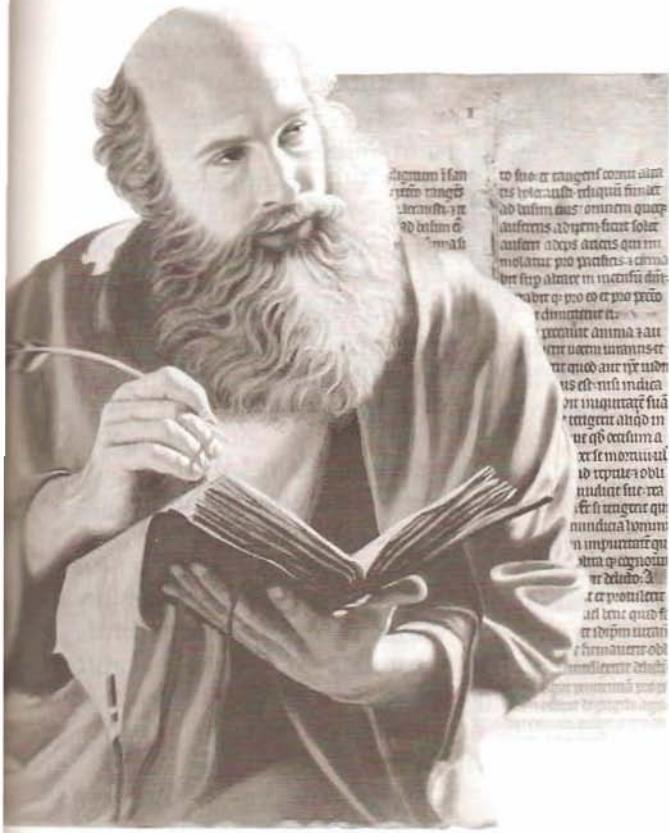
Independent initiatives to translate parts of the Scriptures into Latin created some confusion. At the end of the fourth century C.E., Augustine believed that "every man who happened to get his hands on a Greek manuscript and who thought that he had any knowledge—be it ever so little—of the two languages ventured upon the work of translation" into Latin. Augustine and others thought that there were too many translations in circulation and doubted their accuracy.

Jerome's Version

The man who attempted to end this translation confusion was Jerome, who at times served as secretary to Damasus, the bishop of Rome, in 382 C.E. The bishop invited Jerome to revise the Latin text of the Gospels, and Jerome completed that task in just a few years. Then he began a revision of the Latin translation of other Bible books.

Jerome's translation, which later came to be called the *Vulgate*, was a composite text.

* For more information on why the Christian Scriptures were written in Greek, see the article "Did You Know?" on page 13.



RENDERINGS THAT MADE HISTORY

The Vetus Latina, translated from Greek, contained many renderings that were to make history. One of these was the translation of the Greek word *di-a-the'ke*, "covenant," as *testamentum*, or "testament." (2 Corinthians 3:14) As a result of that rendering, many people still refer to the Hebrew and the Greek Scriptures as the Old Testament and the New Testament respectively.

Jerome based his version of the Psalms on the *Septuagint*, a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures completed in the second century B.C.E. He revised the Gospels, and he also translated a good part of the Hebrew Scriptures from the original Hebrew. The rest of the Scriptures were probably revised by others. Sections of the *Vetus Latina* were also eventually merged back into Jerome's *Vulgate*.

Jerome's work initially received a cool response. Even Augustine criticized it. Yet, it slowly established itself as the standard for single-volume Bibles. In the eighth and ninth centuries, such scholars as Alcuin and Theodulf set about correcting linguistic and textual errors that had crept into Jerome's version because of repeated copying. Others divided the text into chapters, making it easier to consult the Scriptures. When printing with movable type was invented, Jerome's version was the first Bible to go to press.

It was at the Council of Trent in 1546 that the Catholic Church for the first time called Jerome's version the *Vulgate*. The council declared this Bible "authentic," making it a reference text for Catholicism. At the same time, the council also called for a revision. The work was to be overseen by special committees, but Pope Sixtus V, impatient to see it completed and evidently



ALCUIN'S VERSION OF THE
LATIN BIBLE, 800 C.E.

a little overconfident regarding his own abilities, decided to finish the job himself. Printing of his revised edition had just begun when the pope died in 1590. The cardinals immediately repudiated what they considered to be a work full of errors, and they recalled it.

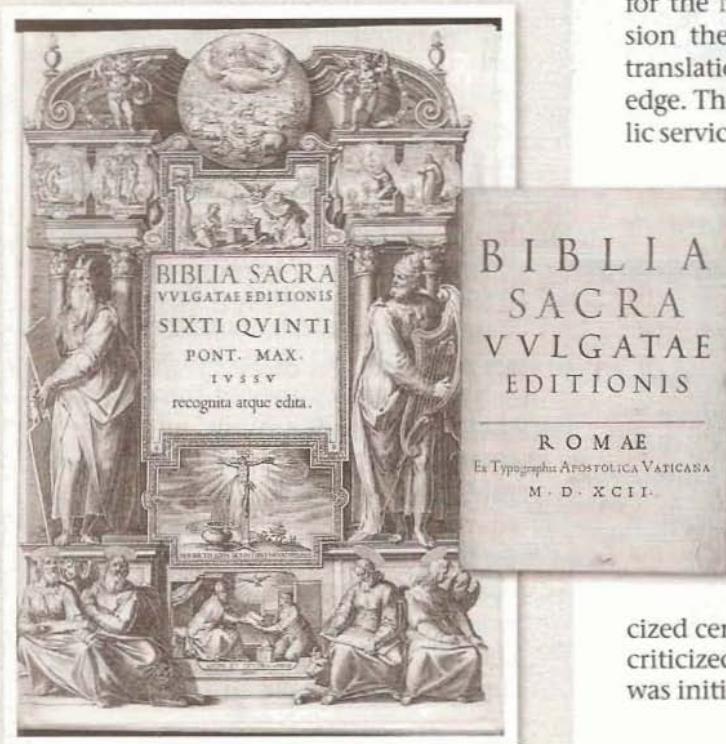
A new version published in 1592 under Pope Clement VIII eventually became known as the Sixtine Clementine edition. It remained the Catholic Church's official version for quite some time. The Sixtine Clementine *Vulgata* also became the basis for Catholic translations into the vernacular, such as Antonio Martini's translation into Italian, completed in 1781.

A Modern Bible in Latin

Textual criticism in the 20th century made it clear that the *Vulgata*, like other versions, needed revision. To that end, in 1965 the Catholic Church established a Commission for the New *Vulgata* and gave the commission the responsibility to revise the Latin translation on the basis of updated knowledge. The new text was to be used for Catholic services in Latin.

The first section of the new translation appeared in 1969, and in 1979, Pope John Paul II approved the *Nova Vulgata*. The first edition contained the divine name, *Iahveh*, in a number of verses, including Exodus 3:15 and 6:3. Then, as one member of the committee put it, the second official edition, published in 1986, "repented . . . *Dominus* ['Lord'] was put back, in place of *Iahveh*."

Just as the *Vulgata* was criticized centuries before, the *Nova Vulgata* was criticized, even by Catholic scholars. While it was initially presented as a translation with a



SIXTINE CLEMENTINE
VULGATE, 1592

montem istum ».

Ait Moyses ad Deum: « Ecce, ego vadam
us patrum vestrorum misit me ad
nomen eius? », quid dicam eis?
Ego sum qui sum ». Ait: « Sic di-
ce ad vos ». ¹⁵ Dixitque iterum Deu-
Israel: **Iahveh** (*Qui est*), Deus pat-
reus Isaac et Deus Iacob misit me
aeternum, et hoc memoriale meum
n. ¹⁶ Vade et congrega seniores Is-
rael, et Iahveh patrum vestrorum apparuit mi-

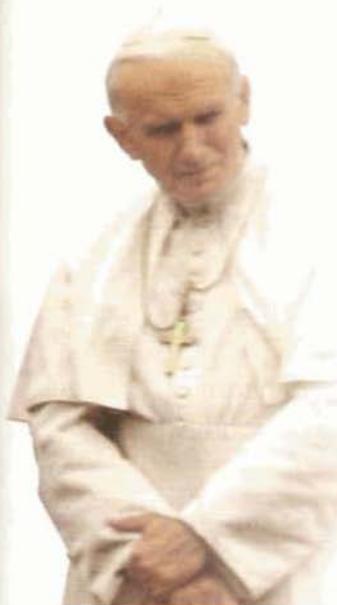
EXODUS 3:15,
NOVA VULGATA, 1979

strong ecumenical flavor, many viewed it as an obstacle to religious dialogue, particularly because it was proposed as a binding model for current language versions. In Germany, the *Nova Vulgata* was at the center of a controversy between Protestants and Catholics in connection with the revision of an interdenominational translation. Protestants accused Catholics of insisting that this new translation conform to the *Nova Vulgata*.

Even though Latin is no longer commonly spoken, the Bible in Latin has had both a direct and an indirect influence on millions of readers. It has shaped religious terminology in many languages. Regardless of the language in which it is produced, however, God's Word continues to exert power, changing the lives of millions of people who obediently strive to act in harmony with its precious teachings.—Hebrews 4:12.



Pope John
Paul II approved
the *Nova
Vulgata*. The
first edition
contained the
divine name,
Iahveh



A DEBATED INSTRUCTION

In 2001, after four years of work, the Vatican Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments published its *Liturgiam authenticam* (Authentic Liturgy) instruction. It has been harshly criticized by many Catholic scholars.

According to this instruction, since the *Nova Vulgata* is the church's official edition, it should be used as a model for all other translations, even if it alters what is indicated in the ancient originals. Only by conforming to such direction can a Bible be accepted by the Catholic hierarchy. This instruction says that in Catholic versions, "the name of almighty God expressed by the Hebrew tetragrammaton (YHWH)" should be rendered into "any given vernacular by a word equivalent in meaning" to *Dominus*, or "Lord," as does the second edition of the *Nova Vulgata*—even though the first edition used "Iahveh."*

* See the article "Vatican Seeks to Eliminate Use of the Divine Name," on page 30.

Jehoash Left Jehovah Because of Bad Association

IT WAS a terrible time in Jerusalem, the city where God's temple stood. King Ahaziah had just been killed. It is hard even to imagine what Ahaziah's mother, Athaliah, then did. She had Ahaziah's sons—her own grandchildren—murdered! Do you know why?—* So that she could become the ruler instead of any one of them.

However, one of Athaliah's grandsons, the baby Jehoash, was saved, and his grandmother did not even know about it. Would you like to know how?— Well, the baby had an aunt named Jehosheba, who hid Jehoash in God's temple. She could do this because her husband was High Priest Jehoiada. So together they made sure that Jehoash was kept safe.

For six years, Jehoash was secretly kept in the temple. There he was taught all about Jehovah God and his laws. Finally, when Jehoash reached seven years of age, Jehoiada took action to make Jehoash king. Would you like to hear how Jehoiada did this and what happened to Jehoash's grandmother, wicked Queen Athaliah?—

Well, Jehoiada secretly called together the special bodyguards that kings in Jerusalem had at that time. He told them how he and his wife had saved the baby son of King Ahaziah. Then Jehoiada showed Jehoash to those bodyguards, who realized that he was the rightful ruler. And a plan was made.

Jehoiada brought Jehoash out and crowned him. At that, the people "began to clap their hands and say: 'Let the king live!'" The bodyguards surrounded Jehoash to protect him. Well, when Athaliah heard all this rejoicing, she ran out and objected. But at Jehoiada's command, the bodyguards put Athaliah to death.—2 Kings 11:1-16.

Do you think Jehoash continued to listen to Jehoiada and to do what

* If you are reading with a child, the dash provides a reminder to pause and encourage the child to express himself.

was right?— He did as long as Jehoiada was alive. Jehoash even saw to it that people gave money to repair God's temple, which had been neglected by his father, Ahaziah, and his grandfather Jehoram. But let's see what happened when High Priest Jehoiada died.—2 Kings 12:1-16.

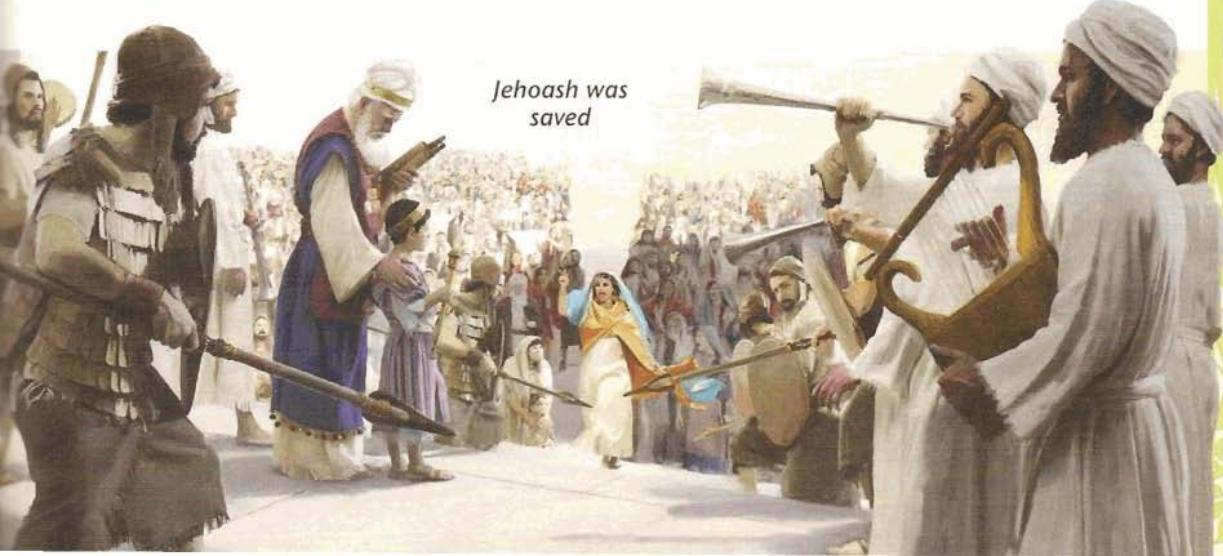
By then Jehoash was about 40 years old. Rather than continue keeping company with those who served Jehovah, Jehoash became friends with those who worshipped false gods. Zechariah, the son of Jehoiada, was Jehovah's priest by that time. What do you think Zechariah did when he learned about the bad things that Jehoash was now doing?—

Zechariah told Jehoash: "Because you have left Jehovah, he will, in turn, leave you." Those words made Jehoash so angry that he ordered that Zechariah be stoned to death. Just imagine—Jehoash had been saved from a murderer, but now he himself had Zechariah murdered!—2 Chronicles 24:1-3, 15-22.

Can you see lessons for us to learn from this account?— Well, we never want to be like Athaliah, who was hateful and cruel. Rather, we should love our fellow worshippers and even our enemies, just as Jesus taught us to do. (Matthew 5:44; John 13:34, 35) And remember, if we start out doing what is good, as Jehoash did, we need to continue to make friends with those who love Jehovah and who encourage us to serve him.

Questions:

- How was Jehoash saved, and from whom?
- How did Jehoash become the rightful king, and what good did he do?
- Why did Jehoash turn bad, and whom did he murder?
- What lessons can we learn from this Bible story?



Our Readers Ask

ARE WE PREDESTINED?

Some say that fate has decreed the day of our death. Others insist that God personally decides when it is our time to die. In addition, such people regard the key events of life as inevitable. Is that how you view matters?

You might ask yourself the following questions: 'If, in fact, there is nothing we can do to change our destiny, if God or fate has already determined the outcome of a matter, what is the point of praying? And if our destiny is already determined, why take measures to protect our safety? Why wear a seat belt when traveling in a car? For that matter, why refrain from drinking and driving?'

The Bible in no way condones such reckless behavior. Rather than leave matters in the hands of fate, the Bible commanded that the Israelites be safety conscious. For example, they were ordered to build a low wall around the flat roofs of their houses. The purpose was to prevent someone from accidentally falling from the roof. Why, though, would God give such a command if a person were destined to fall from a roof and die?—Deuteronomy 22:8.

What about those who die because of natural disasters or other tragic events beyond their control? Do they have a predetermined "date with death"? No, the Bible writer King Solomon assures us that "time and unforeseen occurrence befall [us] all." (Ecclesiastes 9:11) So no matter how bizarre or unlikely the circum-



stances, tragic events are not predestined.

Some feel, however, that this statement contradicts Solomon's earlier observation: "For everything there is an appointed time, even a time for every affair under the heavens: a time for birth and a time to die." (Ecclesiastes 3:1, 2) But was Solomon really endorsing a fatalistic view? Let us look closely at those words.

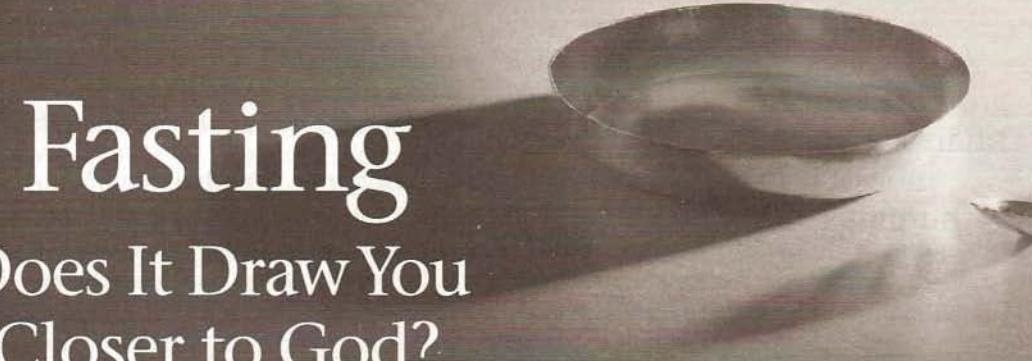
Solomon was not saying that births and deaths are predestined. Rather, his point is that births and deaths, like many things in life, come in endless cycles. Certainly, life will have its ups and downs. "There is . . . a time to weep and a time to laugh," says Solomon. Such repeated patterns and unforeseen calamities, Solomon shows, are common to life, to "every affair under the heavens." (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; 9:11, 12) His conclusion, therefore, is not to get so swept up in our daily affairs that we overlook our Creator.—Ecclesiastes 12:1, 13.

Though our Creator understands life and death completely, he does not force a destiny on us. The Bible teaches that God offers all of us the prospect of living forever. But God does not compel us to accept his offer. Instead, his Word says: "Let anyone that wishes take life's water free."—Revelation 22:17.

Yes, we must want to "take life's water." Thus, our future is not determined by fate. Our own decisions, attitudes, and actions have a real impact on our future.

Fasting

Does It Draw You Closer to God?



'Fasting is something that helps you contemplate spirituality and reminds you that material objects are not the most important thing in life.'

—A CATHOLIC WOMAN.

'Fasting helps you attain a spiritual connection to God.'—A JEWISH RABBI.

'In my faith, fasting is an obligation, a pillar to show my devotion to and gratitude for God. I fast because I love God.'

—A FOLLOWER OF THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH.

FASTING is a practice common to many of the world's religions, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, and Judaism. Many people believe that abstaining from food for a certain period of time draws one closer to God.

What do you think? Should you fast? What does God's Word, the Bible, have to say on this subject?

Fasts in Bible Times

In Bible times, people fasted for various reasons that met with divine approval. Some fasted to express extreme sorrow or repentance for sins (1 Samuel 7:4-6), to implore God's favor or seek his guidance (Judges 20:26-28; Luke 2:36, 37), or to sharpen one's

concentration while meditating.—Matthew 4:1, 2.

The Bible, however, also refers to fasts that God did not view with favor. King Saul fasted before consulting a spirit medium. (Leviticus 20:6; 1 Samuel 28:20) Wicked people, such as Jezebel as well as the fanatics who planned to kill the apostle Paul, proclaimed fasts. (1 Kings 21:7-12; Acts 23:12-14) The Pharisees were well-known for their regular fasting. (Mark 2:18) Yet, they were condemned by Jesus, and they failed to impress God. (Matthew 6:16; Luke 18:12) Likewise, Jehovah ignored the fasts of certain Israelites because of their bad conduct and wrong motives.—Jeremiah 14:12.

The
Pharisees
displayed
mock
humility
when
fasting



These examples show that it is not the act of fasting in itself that pleases God. However, many sincere servants of God who did fast met with divine approval. So should Christians fast?

Is Fasting Obligatory for Christians?

The Mosaic Law ordered the Jews to “afflict [their] souls,” that is, to fast, once a year on Atonement Day. (Leviticus 16:29-31; Psalm 35:13) This was the only fasting that Jehovah ever commanded his people to do.* Jews who lived under the Mosaic Law would have obeyed that command. But Christians are not required to observe the Mosaic Law.—Romans 10:4; Colossians 2:14.

Although Jesus did fast as the Law required, he was not known for this practice. He told his disciples how they were to act if they chose to fast, but he never commanded that they fast. (Matthew 6:16-18; 9:14) Why, then, did Jesus say that his disciples would fast after his death? (Matthew 9:15) This was not a command. Jesus’ words simply suggest that at his death his disciples would feel deep sorrow and would lose the desire to eat.

Two Biblical accounts of early Christians who did fast show that if with good motive a person chooses to abstain from food, this is acceptable to God. (Acts 13:2, 3; 14:23)[#] Christians, then, are under no obligation to fast. Yet, a person who chooses to do so should be alert to certain dangers.

Beware of the Pitfalls

One pitfall to avoid regarding fasting is self-righteousness. The Bible warns against adopting “mock humility.” (Colossians 2:20-23) Jesus’ illustration of the proud Pharisee who felt morally superior to others because of his regular fasting leaves no doubt that God rejects such an attitude.—Luke 18:9-14.

It would also be a mistake to publicize the fact that you fast or to fast because another person tells you to do so. According to Matthew 6:16-18, Jesus counseled that fasting should be a private matter, between you and God, and that you should not announce it to others.

One should never think that fasting somehow compensates for sinning. To be acceptable to God, a fast must be accompanied by obedience to his laws. (Isaiah 58:3-7) Heartfelt repentance,

* Esther’s fasting was not commanded by God, though it seems that her fasting met with his approval. Today, the Jewish Festival of Purim is traditionally preceded by the Fast of Esther.

[#] Some Bibles include spurious references to fasting, but these additions do not appear in the oldest Greek manuscripts.—Matthew 17:21; Mark 9:29; Acts 10:30; 1 Corinthians 7:5, King James Version.

not the act of fasting itself, is what leads to the forgiveness of sins. (Joel 2:12, 13) The Bible emphasizes that we receive forgiveness by Jehovah's undeserved kindness expressed through the sacrifice of Christ. It is impossible to earn forgiveness through any works, including fasting.—Romans 3:24, 27, 28; Galatians 2:16; Ephesians 2:8, 9.

Isaiah 58:3 illustrates another common error. The Israelites suggested that Jehovah owed them something in return for their fasting, as if by fasting, they were doing God a favor. They asked: "For what reason did we fast and you did not see, and did we afflict our soul and you would take no note?" Many today likewise think that because of their fasting, they can expect God to perform some favor for them in return. May we never imitate such a disrespectful and unscriptural attitude!

Others believe that it is possible to earn merit by submitting the body to discomfort through fasting, whipping themselves, or the like. God's Word condemns this notion, showing that "a severe treatment of the body" is "of no value in combating" wrong desires.—Colossians 2:20-23.

A Balanced View

Fasting is not obligatory; nor is it wrong. It may be beneficial in some circumstances if

"The kingdom of God does not mean eating and drinking, but means righteousness and peace and joy"

the dangers mentioned above are avoided. Fasting, however, is not the focus of acceptable worship. Jehovah is "the happy God," and he wants his servants to be happy. (1 Timothy 1:11) His own Word says: "There is nothing better for them than . . . that every man should eat and indeed drink and see good for all his hard work. It is the gift of God."—Ecclesiastes 3:12, 13.

Our worship should be characterized by joy, but the Bible never associates fasting with happiness. Moreover, if abstaining from food were to affect our health adversely or sap our energy for the joyful work that our Maker has entrusted to true Christians—that of declaring the good news of the Kingdom—then it would clearly be counterproductive.

Whether we choose to fast or not, we should avoid judging others. Among true Christians, there should be no controversy over this subject, "for the kingdom of God does not mean eating and drinking, but means righteousness and peace and joy with holy spirit."—Romans 14:17.

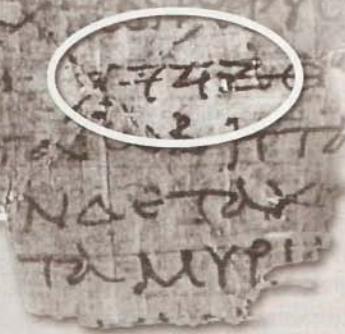
What About Lent?

The 40-day fast of Lent is said to commemorate the 40-day fast of Christ. Yet, Jesus never commanded his disciples to commemorate his fast, nor is there any evidence that they did so. The first reliable mention of the 40-day fast before Easter is thought to be in letters of Athanasius, dated 330 C.E.

Since Jesus fasted following his baptism and not before his death, the fact that some religions observe Lent in the weeks preceding Easter may seem strange. However, a 40-day fast in the early part of the year was common among ancient Babylonians, Egyptians, and Greeks. The "Christian" custom was evidently borrowed from them.

Vatican Seeks to Eliminate Use of the Divine Name

Courtesy of the Egypt Exploration Society



A fragment of the "Septuagint" dating from the first century C.E. The divine name, represented by the four Hebrew letters commonly transliterated YHWH, is circled.

"This is my name for all time."
—Exodus 3:15, JB

THE Catholic hierarchy is seeking to eliminate the use of the divine name in their church services. Last year, the Vatican Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments sent instructions on this matter to Catholic bishops' conferences worldwide. The step was taken "by directive" of the pope.

This document, dated June 29, 2008, decries the fact that despite instructions to the contrary, "in recent years the practice has crept in of pronouncing the God of Israel's proper name, known as the holy or divine *tetragrammaton*, written with four consonants of the Hebrew alphabet in the form יְהָוָה, YHWH." The document notes that the divine name has variously been rendered "Yahweh," "Yahwè," "Jahweh," "Jahwè," "Jave," "Yehovah," and so forth.* However, the Vatican directive seeks to reestablish the traditional Catholic position. That is to say, the Tetragrammaton is to be replaced by "Lord." Moreover, in Catholic religious services, hymns, and prayers, God's name "YHWH is neither to be used or pronounced."

In support of this position, the Vatican's document appeals to the "immemorial tradition" of Catholicism. The directive claims that even in the Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, dating to pre-Christian times, the divine name was regularly rendered *Ky'ri-os*, the Greek word for "Lord." Thus, the directive insists, "Christians, too, from the beginning never pronounced the divine *tetragrammaton*." This statement, however, ignores clear evidence to the contrary. Early copies of the *Septuagint* contained, not *Ky'ri-os*, but the divine name in the form יְהָוָה. Christ's first-century followers knew and pronounced God's name. Jesus himself said in prayer to his Father: "I have made your name known." (John 17:26) And in his well-known model prayer, Jesus taught us to pray: "Our Father in the heavens, let your name be sanctified."—Matthew 6:9.

It should be the desire of all Christians to see God's name sanctified. Vatican efforts to eliminate its use disonor Jehovah, the one who said: "This is my name for all time; by this name I shall be invoked for all generations to come."—Exodus 3:15, *The Jerusalem Bible*.

* In English, the form "Jehovah" has been widely recognized for centuries and is used in many Bible translations.

The Father of Fatherless Boys

Exodus 22:22-24

AFATHER of fatherless boys . . . is God in his holy dwelling.” (Psalm 68:5) Those inspired words convey a touching lesson about Jehovah God—he is sensitive to the needs of disadvantaged ones. His concern for children who lose a parent in death was clearly evident in the Law he gave to Israel. Let us examine the Bible’s first reference to the “fatherless boy,”* found at Exodus 22:22-24.

God warns: “You people must not afflict any . . . fatherless boy.” (Verse 22) This was not a mere plea for humanitarianism; it was a divine command. A child who lost his father—and hence his protector and sustainer—was vulnerable. No one was to “afflict” such a child in any way. In other Bible translations, the word “afflict” is rendered “abuse,” “mistreat,” and “take advantage of.” To wrong a fatherless child was a serious matter in God’s eyes. Just how serious?

The Law continues: “If you should afflict him at all, then if he cries out to me at all, I shall unfailingly hear his outcry.” (Verse 23) The account switches from the plural “you” in verse 22 to

* The expression “fatherless boy” appears some 40 times in the Bible. Although the Hebrew word thus rendered is in the masculine gender, we should not think that the principles underlying such statements excluded girls who lost a father. The Mosaic Law upheld the rights of fatherless girls as well.—Numbers 27:1-8.



the singular “you” in verse 23. The individual and the nation as a whole were equally responsible for obeying this divine precept. Jehovah was watching; he inclined his ear to the fatherless boys, ever ready to respond to their cries for help.—Psalm 10:14; Proverbs 23:10, 11.

What, then, would happen if someone were to wrong a fatherless boy, giving that child reason to cry out to God? “My anger will indeed blaze,” says Jehovah, “and I shall certainly kill you with the sword.” (Verse 24) One Bible reference work says that this “is literally ‘and my nose will become hot,’ which is an idiom for intense anger.” Notice that Jehovah did not leave it up to the human judges in Israel to enforce this law. God himself would execute judgment upon anyone who took advantage of a defenseless child.—Deuteronomy 10:17, 18.

Jehovah has not changed. (Malachi 3:6) His heart goes out to children who lack a parent or parents. (James 1:27) Make no mistake—the Father of fatherless boys is provoked to righteous anger by the victimization of innocent children. Those who would seek to exploit a vulnerable child will not escape “the burning anger of Jehovah.” (Zephaniah 2:2) Such wicked ones will learn that “it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” —Hebrews 10:31.

Is There a True Religion From God's Standpoint?

Many people are born into their religion. Others choose their form of worship later in life. There is certainly no shortage of religions from which to choose. Perhaps you have wondered, 'Does it really matter which religion I belong to?'

That question will be answered in the public discourse "Is There a True Religion From God's Standpoint?" This Bible talk will be given worldwide in over 230 lands. In most places, it will be delivered at the local Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses on Sunday, April 26, 2009. The Witnesses in your area will be glad to provide you with the time and address. You are warmly invited to attend.