



Mooroolbark Christian Fellowship

Study Supplement No. 20

Did The Jews Kill Jesus? By Joseph Tkach	<i>Page 2</i>
It's Hard To Forgive By Joseph Tkach	<i>Page 4</i>
The Beast Awakens By Greg Albrecht	<i>Page 8</i>
Bible Study: The Certainty of Gods Love By J. Michael Morrison	<i>Page 12</i>
A Lesson About Misperception By Michael Feazell	<i>Page 14</i>

Study Supplement No. 20

Something worth thinking about...

By Joseph Tkach



Did the Jews kill Jesus?

Part of the controversy surrounding the movie *The Passion of the Christ* is whether the film is anti-Semitic. Does it blame the Jews for the death of Jesus? Here's a related question: Whether or not the film blames the Jews, are they to blame?

I can understand why Jews might be concerned about it. Christians have often persecuted Jews for being "Christ-killers." This goes far beyond name-calling—it has included economic penalties, violence and even murder, in the name of taking revenge for the death of Jesus.

Many Jews were killed in the Crusades, and much more recently, millions were killed in 20th century Europe—and the Nazis were not the only ones who persecuted Jews. The Nazis can hardly be called Christian, but the attitude that fuelled their hatred was nurtured by centuries of anti-Jewish teaching in the European churches.

Many Christians have been troubled by the Jews' persistent rejection of the Christian message. Historically, perhaps due to some insecurity in their own beliefs, some have wanted to use force to achieve social conformity. Some people apparently felt that the easiest way to get rid of the problem was to kill the Jews; especially those who refused to accept Christianity (but sometimes even Christian Jews were persecuted).

I am ashamed of what some people have done, supposedly in the name of Christ. But I do not want to let my shame distort my view of what actually happened. So let's talk about it: Is Mel Gibson's movie anti-Semitic, did the Jews kill Jesus, and what attitude should Christians have toward the Jewish people?

Comments on the movie

I was privileged to see an early screening of the movie, when Mission America invited numerous denominational leaders to view a preliminary version in December. So I was able to have my own impression as I saw the controversy aired in the news media. The controversy has certainly given the film a huge amount of free publicity, and this may cause some non-Christians to see it, although the majority of the viewers seem to be committed Christians already.

Mel Gibson met with the Mission America group to answer questions, and he commented on the accusations of anti-Semitism, saying in effect that the problem that people have with the film is not really with the film—it is with the Gospels, for the film simply portrays what the Gospels report (there is little controversy about the nonbiblical parts that Gibson added to the film, such as the story line for Mary Magdalene, Pilate's wife and Simon of Cyrene).

I must agree with Gibson on that point—the film did not create a problem, but simply portrayed (in a visually stunning and memorable way) the story contained in the Gospels. Because of Gibson's theology, it dwells on the scourging longer than the Gospels do, but what it portrays was historically probable. (Catholics tend to focus more on the suffering and crucifixion, and Protestants more on the resurrection, but both are included in the story.)

If anything, I think that the film, as compared to the Gospel accounts, decreased the role of the Jews. Whereas the Gospels repeatedly refer to "the Jews," "the Pharisees," "the Sadducees," etc., the film deleted most of those references as unnecessary. (In the recent film on *The Gospel of John*, these repeated references

Study Supplement No. 20

were retained, since that film was committed to including all the NIV text.)

In Gibson's film, the group of people who arrested Jesus, who interrogated him and asked Pilate to crucify him, are barely identified as Jews. (The only person explicitly called a Jew is Simon of Cyrene.) If a person did not know the story already, he or she might even wonder who those people in the elaborate costumes were. The blame must also fall on Pilate, who as governor had the responsibility to prevent such miscarriages of justice but did not have the courage to do so.

Gibson even removed from his film the line from Matthew 27:25, where the crowd of Jewish people said, "Let his blood be on us and on our children!" This verse in particular has been used numerous times to justify anti-Semitism, so Gibson was willing to remove its English subtitle (it was retained in Aramaic), since it was not necessary for the story line.

What do the Gospels portray?

Do the Gospels themselves blame the Jews for the death of Jesus? Yes, and no.

Historically, yes, Jews were there, and they wanted Jesus, himself a Jew, dead. Jesus was seen as a threat to national security, a popular teacher who might provoke a rebellion against Rome and cause many to be killed. John 11:47-50 gives this reason for the crucifixion, and it makes good historical sense. So certain Jewish leaders arranged for a rigged trial and demanded that Pilate execute Jesus.

John repeatedly calls these people "the Jews," but that is simply his shorthand for the Jewish leaders who opposed Jesus. They were official representatives of the Jewish people. Josephus uses the word in a similar way to refer to certain powerful leaders, not the entire ethnic group, not all, or even most, Jews. John does not mean to blame all Jews everywhere for what some few of them did in Jerusalem.

John was quite aware that influential supporters of Jesus such as Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were Jews, that the disciples were Jews, and that many Jews looked on Jesus favourably even without being totally committed to him. John clearly points out, "Salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:22). The Gospels are plain that Roman leaders, particularly Pilate,

authorized and carried out the actual crucifixion. They had the responsibility of preventing innocent people from being hurt, and yet they knowingly caused an innocent man to be tortured and killed. They must share the blame. Both religion and state were involved.

Jews and Gentiles alike are guilty—indeed, all people are just as guilty. Jesus came for the very purpose of being killed by his own people. Had he not, none of us would have a Saviour. What happened was God's design, according to God's purpose, for the salvation of Jews and Gentiles alike. What sense does it make to blame or hate anyone for doing the very thing that God intended be done so that he might demonstrate once and for all his boundless love for humanity?

If we had been there, if we had been the high priest or his supporters, we would have done the same thing. The Jewish and Roman leaders were acting not just as representatives of two ethnic groups, but as representatives of all humanity. We all needed the death and resurrection of Jesus, and every ethnic group has been involved in equally unjust killings and murder of innocent people. God does not hate the Jews or the Romans—he loves them—just as he loves all humanity, which is why he came to us humans as our sacrificial Lamb.

The Jewish crowd did accept responsibility for the death of Jesus (Matthew 27:25), but there is no reason for us to accept the validity of their claim. They never had the authority to condemn their own children, and we must not act as if they did. Let us remember that Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34)—and that statement applies to the Jews just as much as it does to the Romans (in Gibson's film, even the thief on the cross recognizes that). The message of Christ is not one of blame or revenge—it is one of forgiveness and redemption.

God's attitude toward the Jews

God selected the nation of Israel to be his people. He adopted them as his child (or to use another metaphor, his bride) and promised to be their God (which implies that he would protect, provide for and guide them). He made a covenant with them, solemnizing his promises to them. But the people repeatedly

Study Supplement No. 20

broke the covenant, and God even divorced the northern tribes, calling them “not my people.” They had become like Gentiles to him. And God knew they would from the beginning (Deuteronomy 31:20).

But God would not change; his love and his faithfulness to his word for them will never diminish (Romans 11). God continued to love his chosen people even after they were exiled to Babylon. In his love he called a remnant back to Judea. From that remnant would come the Messiah, the Christ, who would redeem his people and the whole world.

When the new covenant came, the old covenant ended in the fulfillment of the promise of God with his people. But God’s love for Israel will never come to an end (Romans 11:1). God is faithful even when people are not. In his faithfulness to Israel, God demonstrates his faithfulness to all humanity (verse 26).

We must make a distinction between the Jewish religion and the Jewish people. The Bible says that the Jewish religion is ineffective so far as salvation is concerned, but God loves the Jewish people. The fact that the old covenant is obsolete does not make the Jews worse than everyone else; rather, they should be treated the same as all people are, sinners saved by God’s grace.

Christians should love the Jews and want them to be saved, just as Paul did (Romans 10:1).

Our desire for the Jewish people is that they become Christians, not that they cease being Jewish. Although the Israeli Supreme Court may see a contradiction between those two terms, we do not. Like all people, Jews are to be won through love, through kindness, not persecution.

Salvation is from the Jews, but it is not from Judaism. Salvation is from Jesus, the Son, a Jew whom God sent to Jews for the sake of Jews and Gentiles alike. The Jews are not Christ-killers any more than we all are. We have all been enemies of God.

“As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies on your account; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs” (Romans 11:28). Religiously, they are off track, but God loves them anyway, and in his unending love he will draw them back to himself.

The extent of his love

I pray that no one uses Gibson’s film to justify anti-Jewish attitudes. That would be a distortion of the film, a distortion of the Gospels, and an un-Christian thing to do. The film makes it clear that Jesus knew what he was getting into (he had probably seen other people beaten and crucified), and yet he did it anyway, because he loved us. If you see the film, I ask that you remember it not for the graphic blood and violence, for its dealing with evil’s attack on God, but for the reminder of Jesus’ love for us.

Simon of Cyrene was different—he did not know what he was getting into when he walked into Jerusalem that day. Mark 15:21 calls him “the father of Alexander and Rufus”—two men who were known to Mark’s readers, probably because they had become Christians. Simon himself is likely to have become a Christian, and thus he carried the cross of Christ in a spiritual sense as well.

Perhaps we are all a little like Simon. Did you know what you were getting into? Are you willing to carry the cross of Christ? That’s something worth thinking about.

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Something More, Worth Thinking About...

By Joseph Tkach

It's Hard to Forgive

Jesus often said that God is merciful. But he also said, in a statement that can send chills up the spine, “If you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matt. 6:15, NRSV).

Do we have to forgive everyone? Apparently so—yet no one does it perfectly. We don’t do anything perfectly. So how can we ever hope for the Father to forgive us?

Study Supplement No. 20

Examples

After a brief romance, George and Judy married. After an equally brief marriage, Judy walked out on him, crushing his ego like an eggshell on a railroad track. Even 10 years later, George has deep scars from his wound. Is Judy's "sorry, but I want to move on" an apology? Is there ever an acceptable apology for that sort of betrayal?

Bob was the youngest child in a family of seven. He "borrowed" all of his parents' money and lost it in gambling. He's broke now, and the older siblings have to take care of the elderly parents. How can they forgive Bob, when they are still suffering from what he did?

Or perhaps you know someone like Susan, Chris or Karl. Her stepfather abused Susan, and 30 years later she still struggles with a distorted self-image. Chris was paralysed in an accident caused by a drunk driver. Karl was left an orphan when his father committed suicide. The sinners are dead, and can't repent or apologize. Can these victims forgive the people who caused them such pain, or would that trivialize the sin?

What other choice do we have, though? If we hang on to anger, it will eventually eat us from the inside out, like acid in an iron pot. We will become bitter, ulcerated, depressed and unpleasant—we add to our own damage and pain.

Anger raises our blood pressure and hurts our heart. For our own health, we need to forgive—but it's hard to forgive.

Forgiving another believer

"Peter came to Jesus and asked, 'Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?' Jesus answered, 'I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times'" (Matt. 18:21-22, NIV).

Imagine that someone in the church has hurt your feelings, and the person says "sorry." And he or she does it again, and says "sorry." And it happens again, and again you hear "sorry." And again, and again, and again. At what point are you going to say, "I don't think you're really sorry?"

Maybe the person isn't sorry, but Jesus says to forgive them anyway, even 77 times. Try saying

"I forgive you" that many times! It might be good therapy.

Jesus said, "forgive," not "forget," and there is an important difference. Jesus has not forgotten who betrayed him, or deserted him, or ordered his execution, but Jesus does not harbour grudges about it. He wants those people to accept the forgiveness that he offers—he died for them as well as for everyone else.

(When the Bible says that God does not remember our sins any more, it is not talking about forgetfulness—it is using the word *remember* in the sense of taking action on something. Ex. 2:24 is an example of this meaning of "remember.")

Jesus then told a parable that explains why we should forgive: "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents [an enormous amount] was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt" (Matt. 18:23-25).

The king represents God, of course, and the debt corresponds to our sins. We are totally unable to pay for our sins. Even selling ourselves into slavery would pay only a small fraction of the debt. We can't work our way out of this one.

"The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go" (vs. 26-27).

We can't pay our debt, but if we ask for mercy, God will give us more than we ask. That's what the kingdom of God is like.

(As an aside here, we can see that the servant didn't have a totally accurate understanding of God's grace. He asked for mercy, but still thought he could do something to repay his debt. That's like a lot of Christians today, who don't really believe they are forgiven unless they have done some kind of penance. Yet God forgives them anyway, even if they don't

Study Supplement No. 20

understand how sweeping his forgiveness really is.)

So far, so good. It would be a great parable if Jesus just stopped right here. But Jesus did not stop here, and the second part of the parable makes me squirm a little. But I have to remember that Peter's question is not whether he is forgiven, but whether he has to forgive others—and this is the task that we frequently face.

The unmerciful servant

“But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded” (v. 28).

The first servant was determined to pay off his own debt by collecting every cent he could. A hundred denarii was a significant amount, but it was only a tiny fraction of the 10,000 talents. But every penny counts, the servant must have thought, and he even used a little violence to underscore his determination to collect.

Christians today do this as well. When they think they have to earn God's respect through obedience and good works, they look down on people who aren't trying as hard as they are.

“His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back’ [which is what the first servant had said to his master]. But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt” (vs. 29-30). He wanted the man's relatives to cough up the money to get the guy out of jail. He was playing hardball in a desperate attempt to gather enough cash to impress the king with his sincerity.

“When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ ” (vs. 31-33).

This chapter is about life in a community, not just between one person and God. This is a small reminder in this parable that our actions affect other people, and that we should

encourage one another to give mercy, just as we have been given mercy.

Now here is where the parable turns into a warning: “In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart” (vs. 34-35).

Shocking! — Jesus represents God as taking away the forgiveness he once gave, and inflicting punishment, knowing quite well that the man will never be able to “pay back all he owed.”

But Jesus is not attempting to tell us about the nature of eternal punishment—he is simply presenting this as a warning, with terms appropriate to the parable, that we must forgive others not grudgingly, but from the heart.

Faulty forgiveness

But is Jesus laying on us an impossible burden? It is easy to say “you are forgiven,” but it is difficult to mean it in our heart. Aren't we still angry at the injustice that was done to us? Don't we still hurt when we think about it? Don't we still want the person to be punished for what was done? What are we to do with the vial of bitterness we have accumulated in our thoughts?

If this parable had been longer, maybe it would have gone something like this: “And the wicked servant said, ‘O my king, you are right. You have been patient with me; I should be just as patient with my fellow servants. Please do not throw me in jail. Have mercy on me again. I will forgive the people who ask me for mercy.’ And the king said, ‘You are forgiven.’”

“And the wicked servant went out and found a woman who owed him 50 denarii, and he demanded to be repaid within a week. The woman was exceedingly sorrowful, and sold herself into slavery to pay the debt. And since she did not ask for mercy, none was given.

“The other servants found out about this and reported it to the king, and the king was angry and called the wicked servant in again, saying: ‘You wicked servant! I forgave your huge debt because you asked me to. Can you not see that the poor woman wanted mercy even though she was afraid to ask?’ Therefore I will

Study Supplement No. 20

throw you into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

"The wicked servant then said: 'O my king, you are right again. If you forgive me this time, I will sell some of my possessions to redeem the woman from slavery.' 'Well done,' said the king, 'you may go.' And the wicked servant went out and straightway forgot what he had promised.

"And he was reported to the king again, was threatened with punishment again, asked for mercy again, and was forgiven again. And I ask you, how many times will the king forgive—seven times? Nay, he will do it seventy-seven times. That is what the kingdom of heaven is like. God is even more merciful than what he tells us to be."

In other words, God even forgives our imperfect attempts at forgiveness, as long as we look to him for mercy.

The key to forgiving

The better we understand that we are forgiven, the better we can forgive others. That does not mean thinking (as the wicked servant did), "Thanks for your patience; I will still try to repay all that I owe." If we have that attitude, then we still overestimate our abilities, and we will still expect people to pay all that they owe us—grovelling for everything they've done to us.

But the truth (which the wicked servant could have known, if he had listened carefully) is that when God forgives us, we are forgiven. There is no debt to repay. There's nothing to work off, no penance to perform, no need to prove how sincere we were this time. It's forgiven—it's gone.

Another point from the parable that will help us forgive others: We have been forgiven an enormous debt; the sins that people commit against us are much smaller. Even if someone beats you to a bloody mess and nails you to die on a cross, God has forgiven you more than that. Perhaps you find that hard to believe, as I do, but this is the point of what Jesus is saying, and he has earned the right to say it. Forgiveness does not mean that we pretend like nothing ever happened. It does not mean

trusting a swindler with money, trusting a wife-beater to not get abusive again, or appointing a child-molester to be a youth pastor.

Forgiving does mean that we do not harbour grudges and we do not seek vengeance. It means letting go of our need to get even. It means praying for our enemies. It means seeing ourselves in their shoes, knowing that God has, for the sake of Christ, forgiven us all our sins too. No grovelling required. God does not want us to sin again, but his mercy lasts forever.

God wants us to forgive, and he knows that it's hard. He wants us to obey him in everything, and he knows that we don't. That's why our salvation does not depend on our performance, but on the righteousness of Christ. Our salvation does not depend on our performance in keeping the law, or in having enough faith, or in forgiving as well as we ought. In all these areas, we are sinners who fall short of the glory of God.

Our salvation depends not on us, but on Christ, and on our connection to him. He is the one who forgives with the sincerity and frequency that is required, and when our lives are hidden in Christ (Col. 3:3), God attributes Christ's perfect obedience, including his perfect forgiveness, to us.

God wants us to forgive others because he forgives us. He forgives us far more generously than 77 times. The point is that we are to realize our need for mercy, look to him for mercy, depend on his mercy, and instead of harbouring our hurts and nursing our grievances, we need to ask him to help us begin to forgive.

In this world of sin and ignorance, offences are inevitable. We've all been hurt. What's the worst thing that has happened to you? What resentment do you carry? For our own good, we need to let our resentments go. Jesus will help us—that's something worth praying about.

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The Beast Awakens

By Greg Albrecht

Plain Truth editor Greg Albrecht reports from Germany, France, the Netherlands and Belgium—

The beast is emerging from the pit of its exile. Banished from Europe for many decades, the beast is back.

The evil monster is raising its ugly head, spewing venom and hatred, particularly toward those who believe in the God of the Bible. Flexing its powerful political and philosophical muscles, the beast seems to be removing the welcome mat on the doorsteps of many European countries.

Jewish citizens of many sovereign states within the European Union are beginning to feel particularly unwelcome. They are being advised by law enforcement officials not to wear the Star of David or the yarmulke (skull cap) in public. While there is an intense debate within France about wearing “ostentatious” clothing with religious symbolism, including head scarves worn by Muslim women, only clothing worn in public that identifies one as being Jewish is worthy of a special warning in the current climate.

New Wave of Anti-Semitism

A new and virulent revival of centuries old racial and religious hatred is sweeping across the European continent like an apocalyptic xenophobic epidemic. Recent surveys reveal that the beast of anti-Semitism around the world is at its highest level since the end of World War II.

Many Europeans believe that the more recent acts of anti-Semitism in Europe are due to anger over Israeli actions against the Palestinians. In an ironic turn, Jews and Israelis, the people of the Holocaust, are now being demonized as Nazi-like oppressors of Arabs, Muslims and Palestinians.

The truth is ignored or swept under the carpet— perhaps because the truth hurts, and perhaps because the truth behind anti-Semitism is too ugly and reprehensible even for those who do not believe in God.

The Islamic-Arab population in France, estimated at six million — almost 10 percent of the entire population—represents a growing animosity to Jews and Christians. France initially rallied to America’s suffering side after the terrorism of 9-11, but then quickly started to regroup under “not in my back-yard” politics considering the huge Muslim population in its ghettos.

Europeans are apprehensive about the spread of Islamic fundamentalism within their borders, spread by soapbox *imams*, preaching an angry message to second and third generation Arab immigrants, many of whom live in suburban ghettos.

Many Europeans fear terrorist acts in their countries, on soil that was saturated in the 20th century with the blood of two world wars and the Holocaust. Europeans are justifiably tired of hearing the words “war” and “Europe” in the same breath, and many are falling prey to the all-too-human reaction of finding a scapegoat. And as in centuries past, one of the primary scapegoats is once again wearing a Star of David.

The last decade has seen a relent-less growth of racial and religious hatred across Europe, as a German newspaper noted, “Whether Norway, Denmark, Switzerland, Austria, Italy, Portugal, France, Belgium and now Holland, everywhere the right-wing populists are on the march.” (For a view from a Dutch Christian, be sure and read “Alarming Rise of Anti-Semitism” by Henk Askes, on page 11).

Something ugly and sinister, with grave implications for Christians and Jews, has been brewing in Europe for many years, and the hostility is now beginning to be openly displayed.

Politically Correct Hypocrisy

That racial and religious hatred should be an acceptable part of any culture where the value of tolerance and diversity has been enthroned as virtually the only worthy value is the height of hypocrisy. Why isn’t the politically correct culture protecting Jews and Christians?

Study Supplement No. 20

The rising tide of anti-Semitism has reached virtually epidemic proportions in several European countries, including France, but the mainstream media largely ignores it. Yet, while religious and racial hatred and thuggery is being indulged in some parts of Europe, paradoxically, a major European push is underway to criminalize any criticism of homosexuality

If minority groups whose causes happen to be championed by the guardians of political correctness (in many cases justifiably so) were subjected to the bitterness that Christians and Jews hear and receive, the uproar in the media would be deafening.

In 1991 media mogul Ted Turner boldly proclaimed Christianity to be a religion for losers. Just over a decade later some of the media seems to have decided that it is acceptable and politically correct to despise Christians.

20th century Europe provided the fertile soil in which hatred and animosity, and eventual dehumanization of Jews, could escalate into a Holocaust. The same racial and religious hatreds exist today. Little has changed, except a new willingness for the beast of racial and religious hatred to come out of the closet and be expressed.

The liberal elite of the 21st century, in government, education and the media have joined forces to approve and legitimize racial and religious hatred. Hatred of Jews is actually fashionable in some elite European circles.

Daniel Bernard, the French ambassador to Great Britain, recently called the nation of Israel a “sh** little country.” Following this politically incorrect and decidedly intolerant remark, Bernard asked rhetorically, “Why should the world be in danger of World War III because of those people?” In response to a suicide bombing directed at Jews, a European politician told the press, “The Jews have been asking for it.”

One must consider whether Europeans, intimidated and goaded by Muslim populations, have made Jews and the Jewish state of Israel targets of a bitter campaign of vilification. European anti-Semitic rhetoric seems to be hiding behind the skirts of self-righteous

indignation over Israeli policy, and thus overt racism and religious prejudice are being justified.

The logical inconsistency of European hatred of the Jews is that the Jews who are being targeted for violence in places like Paris, Berlin and Brussels are not Israeli citizens, and most have never even visited the state of Israel. This hatred is not merely local and national it is racial and religious.

If current feelings continue to grow, the agenda of radical Muslim terrorists will actually be adopted by the European mainstream. Terrorists whose agenda includes Jewish and Christian targets seem to have many secular Europeans falling into willing compliance.

Lessons from Jedwabne

While considering the implications of European racism and bigotry toward Christians and Jews, I re-read *Neighbors* by Jan T. Gross. I read *Neighbors* when it was first published in 2001, but I wanted to read it again while I experienced and grappled with today's Europe as an American Christian.

Neighbors is the story of what happened in the small Polish town of Jedwabne, when, on July 10, 1941, half of the town was murdered by the other half. Only a handful of the 1,600 Jewish residents of Jedwabne survived. Jan T. Gross attempts to answer the haunting question, “Why?”

Soldiers of the Soviet Union occupied Jedwabne until its takeover by the German military on June 22, 1941. The Germans encouraged local populations they occupied to commit atrocities against their Jewish neighbors, but in the case of Jedwabne little encouragement was necessary. The Polish residents asked their German occupiers if they would permit murder and mayhem against the Jews.

Mayor Marian Karolak of Jedwabne met with the German occupation forces, and after being assured that the Germans would not intervene, a town council of the Poles of Jedwabne decided upon the mass murder of their Jewish neighbors.

Most of the killing was done in one day. The murderers did not wear a German army uniform nor did they display a swastika. This was a

Study Supplement No. 20

case of neighbors killing neighbors. Gross estimates that the murderers included about one-half of the Polish males of Jedwabne, who participated in a primitive orgy of bloodletting against their small town neighbors.

Gross' account of Jedwabne is not the first attempt to explain the Holocaust in a larger context than simply the blood lust of one sick and deranged man,

Adolph Hitler. Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (1996), carefully presents the evidence that Hitler capitalized on centuries old anti-Semitism that was always simmering in German culture (and within organized Christianity for that matter!). Goldhagen helped to en-large the picture about the ultimate culpability for the Holocaust, from Hitler to willing volunteers within German society.

But questions remained after Goldhagen's work. Why the Ger-mans and not other nationalities? Jan T. Gross offers further perspective into the end result of racial and religious hatred with his chilling account of the atrocities perpetrated by Poles upon their small town Jewish neighbors. The atrocities apparently took place after civil restraints were lifted, restraints that Polish society and that of their Soviet Union occupiers had previously imposed.

Within a few weeks of German occupation, ordinary Poles, who apparently had not received the same kind of indoctrination and hatred against the Jews that Germans had experienced in their culture, perpetrated a frenzy of murder, without the justification of German cultural conditioning.

Why?

Even secular scholars realize that when all moral restraints are lifted, the base and profoundly evil acts of our sinful human nature are unleashed.

Christopher Browning's *Ordinary Men* was part of Goldhagen's research. A careful historian, Browning suggests that German soldiers who perpetrated Holocaust atrocities were average people who were twisted into immoral barbarians. Browning interviewed 210 men from one German battalion who were responsible for killing 39,000 Jews. He

concluded that the depravity of these *Ordinary Men* was part of their humanity, not simply because they were Germans influenced by Nazism.

History teaches us that when moral order and sensibility are no longer the glue that holds a society together, when all moral decency has been cast off, and then human beings often behave like animals.

At such times, do we humans revert to being animals because we evolved from them, because we are nothing more than civilized animals? Or, do we degenerate into coarse and crude animal-like behavior, without a moral dimension, because we no longer accept any higher moral authority?

God — The Real Target Of the Final Solution

The motivation of the new 21st century coalition of the willing against Jews and Christians may be found in the corresponding at-tempt to exterminate the God of the Bible. European culture has been corroded and weakened by generations of liberal thinking and humanistic philosophical presuppositions. The rejection of the God of the Jews and Christians encouraged by the Enlightenment is now a reality. Secular values have replaced sacred beliefs.

Wave after wave of socialism, humanism, relativism and pluralism have eroded historic Judeo-Christian foundations in Europe. The United States is following a similar pattern, but still hasn't sufficiently "overcome" its Christian values and beliefs. Europe once again finds itself as a battleground. This time the armies are philosophical and spiritual— the secular and the state arrayed against the spiritual and sacred.

Just two months ago Roman Catholic bishops in Poland jointly criticized the draft proposal for the European constitution as not only lacking any reference to God, but also discriminating against religion in general.

The battle between the secular and the sacred is not confined to Europe. In the United Sates this past summer, the Episcopal Church voted for its first openly homosexual priest to be made a bishop.

Study Supplement No. 20

The book of Romans explains the human war against God. The apostle Paul presents a masterful, logical defense of Christianity and the God of the Bible. In a cogent and reasoned argument, Paul builds his case that the only answer for human sin is the cross of Christ. He begins by placing all human beings in the same predicament. We are all sinners, he says, whether we knew about the moral code included in the ten commandments God gave to the Jews or not. Ignorance is no excuse for Paul, because the moral code God gave to the Jews is a reiteration of the natural law he placed within all humans, regardless of race or religion.

Paul explained that even polytheistic pagans knew better than to reject what God had made plain to them (Romans 1:18-21). Paul thus argues for natural law—the foundational truth that all humans have a general sense of right and wrong.

“Natural law”, the God-given moral compass given to all humans, claims that all humans are accountable—Christians, Muslims or Jews—Americans, British, French or German. We are accountable for brutality and bigotry. We will answer to God for unrestrained religious and racial hatred.

Anti-Americanism

Three reasons are normally given by Europeans to explain their dislike and even hatred of the United States; 1) envy (after all, the United States is the only nation in the world with residents from every other country), 2) the accusation that arrogant Americans think they own the world and 3) the allegation that American military force bullies other nations into accepting American culture and economic priorities.

There could be another much deeper cause. The United States is also hated because we represent the last bastion of freedom for the people of the book—for Jews and Christians. The United States guarantees freedom of religion, and that freedom allows Jews and Christians to openly practice their faith and worship their God.

Cultures often seem to need to identify an object of hatred to demonize and ridicule. For

the Nazis it was the Jews. Fifty years ago in the United States it was the Communists. For today's politically correct, tolerance-is-god, multicultural, postmodern, value-neutral western culture, biblical Christianity incites hatred because it dares to assert that moral standards defined in the Bible are absolute and universally true.

Some of the Europeans I talked with expressed concern about growing anti-Semitism as well as anti-Americanism and disagreed with the views of many of their countrymen and women. Ironically, in most cases further conversation revealed that these people were either Christians or Jews.

A Christian Holocaust?

Remember the old proverb of the frog and the pot of hot water? A frog dropped into a pot of hot water will hop out. But a frog placed in a pot of cool water that is slowly heated will adapt to the imperceptible change in the environment and will slowly be boiled to death.

The ominous and murky waters of racial and religious hatred have always existed. What has changed in our world today is the gradual increase in temperature—around the world there are pots of racial and religious hatred that are boiling. Racial and religious hatred has intensified because of the relentless onslaught of socialism, humanism, relativism and pluralism upon the God of the Bible.

Scholars estimate that 70 million Christians have been martyrs for their faith. In his book *The New Persecuted: Inquiries into Anti-Christian Intolerance in the New Century of Martyrs*, Italian journalist Antonio Socci estimates that 45 million of those Christian martyrs died in the 20th century. The global persecution of Christians is ignored by the mass media and is completely under-estimated by most Christians, with many pulpits strangely silent about the Christian holocaust.

How hot will the water need to become before western cultures intent upon throwing off all restraints of the one true God justify overt hatred and persecution of Jews and Christians?

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Bible Study

The certainty of God's love:

A study of Romans 8:18-39

Throughout the book of Romans, Paul has argued that God counts us as righteous through faith in Christ. Even though we sometimes sin, those sins are counted against the old self that was crucified with Christ; our sins do not count against who we are in Christ. We have an obligation to fight sin—not in order to be saved, but because we are already children of God. In the last part of chapter 8, Paul turns his attention to our glorious future.

All creation is waiting for us

The Christian life is not easy. Fighting sin is not easy. Enduring persecution is not easy. Coping with day-to-day life in a fallen world, with corruptible bodies, has its difficulties. Nevertheless, Paul says, **our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us** (v. 18). Just as there was for Jesus, there is joy set before us—a future so wonderful that our current trials will seem minor.

But we are not the only ones who will benefit. Paul says that there is a cosmic significance to God's plan being worked out in us: **The creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed** (v. 19).

The creation not only wants to see us in glory—the creation itself will also be blessed with change when God's plan is brought to completion, as Paul says in the next verses: **For the creation was subjected to frustration ... in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God** (vv. 20-21).

The creation is now in decay; it is not the way it was designed to be. But at the resurrection, when we are given the glory that rightly belongs to God's children, the universe will in some way also be freed from its bondage. The entire universe has been redeemed by the work of Jesus Christ (Col. 1:19-20).

Waiting patiently

Even though the price has already been paid, we do not yet see everything the way God wants it. **The whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time** (Rom. 8:22). The creation is burdened, as if in pain, as it forms the womb in which we are being birthed. Not only that, **but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption, the redemption of our bodies** (v. 23). Even though we have been given the Holy Spirit as an advance payment of salvation, we also struggle, for our salvation is not yet complete. We struggle with sin; we struggle with physical limitations, pain and sorrow—even while we rejoice in what Christ has done for us.

Salvation means that our bodies will be made new, no longer subject to decay (1 Cor. 15:53), and transformed into glory. The physical world is not junk that must be tossed aside—God made it good, and he will make it good again. We do not know how bodies are resurrected, nor the properties of the transformed matter, but we can trust the Creator to complete his work.

We do not yet see a perfect creation, neither in space nor on earth nor in our own bodies, but we have confident hope that it will be transformed. As Paul says: **For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently** (Rom. 8:24-25).

We wait, with both patience and eagerness, for the resurrection of our bodies, when our adoption will be completed. We live in the situation of “already but not yet”: already redeemed, but not yet completely redeemed. We are already freed from condemnation, but not yet completely freed from sin. We are already in the kingdom, but it is not yet in its fullness. We live with aspects of the age to come, even as we struggle with aspects of the old age.

Study Supplement No. 20

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans (v. 26). God knows our limitations and frustrations. He knows that our flesh is weak even when our spirit is willing, so his Spirit intercedes for us, even for needs we cannot put into words.

God's Spirit does not remove our weakness, but helps us in our weakness. He bridges the gap between old and new, between what we see and what he has declared us to be. For example, we sin even though we want to do righteousness (7:14-25). We see sin, but God declares us righteous, because God sees the end result even while the process has just begun.

Despite the discrepancy between what we see and what we want, we can be confident that the Holy Spirit does what we cannot. He will see us through. ***He who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God*** (8:27). God is on our side, helping us, so we can be confident!

Called according to his purpose

Even despite our trials, our weakness and our sins, ***we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose*** (v. 28). God does not cause all things, but he allows them and works with them for his purpose. He has a plan for us, and we can be confident that he will complete his work in us (Phil. 1:6).

God planned in advance that we should become like his Son, Jesus Christ. So he called us through the gospel, justified us through faith in his Son, and united us with him in his glory: ***For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified*** (Rom. 8:29-30).

The meaning of *foreknowledge* and *predestination* is vigorously debated, and this verse does not resolve the debate, for Paul is not focusing on these words here (nor does he elsewhere). Paul is not commenting, for example, on whether God allows people to reject the glory he has planned for them.

Paul's purpose here, as he nears the climax of his presentation of the gospel, is to assure readers that they do not need to worry about their salvation. If they want it, they'll get it. And for rhetorical effect, Paul speaks even of being glorified in the past tense. It is as good as done. Even though we have struggles in this life, we can count on glory in the next life.

More than conquerors

What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? (vv. 31-32). If God went so far as to give us his Son even when we were sinners, we can be sure that he will give us everything else that we need to make it. We can be sure that he is not going to get angry at us and take away his offer. ***Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies*** (v. 33). On the Day of Judgment, no one can accuse us, for God has declared us not guilty. No one can condemn us, for Christ our Saviour is interceding for us: ***Who then can condemn? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us*** (v. 34). We have not just a sacrifice for our sins, but also a living Saviour who continues to help us in our journey toward glory.

Paul's rhetorical skill shines in the stirring climax of the chapter: ***Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered"*** (vv. 35-37, quoting Ps. 44:22). Can our troubles separate us from God? Even if we are killed for the faith, have we lost the battle?

Absolutely not, Paul says: **No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.** Even in pain and suffering, we are not losers—we are better than conquerors, because we share in the victory of Jesus Christ. Our prize—our inheritance—is the eternal glory of God! The prize is infinitely greater than the cost.

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers,

Study Supplement No. 20

neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (vv. 38-39). Nothing can separate us from the plan that God has for us. Absolutely nothing

can separate us from his love. We can be confident in the salvation he has given us.

Michael Morrison
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Questions for discussion

- How do you envision the glory that will be revealed in us? (v. 18) What will we be like?
- How much groaning do we do, and how much does the Spirit intercede for us? (vv. 23, 26).
- Would Paul agree that God works for the good even in cases of child sex abuse, terrorism and genocide? (v. 28).
- God loves everyone, but does everyone love him? He will always love us (v. 39), but will we always love him?

LESSONS FROM THE BIBLE

The Gospel of Mark

Lesson 12: Mark 1:40 - 45

A Lesson About Misperception

By Michael Fezell

A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured. Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning: "See that you don't tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them." Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere.

We are not going to talk about begging Jesus on our knees for healing. I suppose many people have taken this passage as an example of what to do when we sincerely desire to be healed of an affliction. But just about as many people have been disappointed to find that Jesus did not respond to them in the same way as he responded to this leper. So there is no sense in our pretending that if we go to Jesus on our knees and beg for healing that we will assuredly receive it. We believe that Jesus has given us the greatest healing of all—healing from our sins—but he does not always heal our physical

ailments. We trust him to do what is right and good for us and to stand with us in our suffering.

Nor are we going to talk about offering the sacrifices that Moses commanded for cleansing. Much has been said and written about the differences between the old and the new biblical covenants; there is no need to cover that again here.

To obey or not to obey

The lesson we are going to consider in this article has to do with why Jesus did not want the healed leper to tell anyone about his healing. Jesus gave the healed leper the strong warning, "See that you don't tell this to anyone." But the former leper did not obey Jesus. He went straight out and freely spread the news. As a result of this man's disobedience, "Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places." Even in the lonely places, people came to him "from all over."

Should we applaud the former leper, or should we lament his disobedience to Jesus' strong warning? I am reluctant to try to answer that question, except to say that I have found that it is smarter to obey Jesus than not to obey Jesus.

Study Supplement No. 20

In today's world we have the view that telling people about Jesus by whatever means we can muster is the most important activity in which we can be involved. So when we read that the healed leper went out and "began to talk freely, spreading the news," we tend to get excited and wish we could have that same overwhelming joy and evangelistic fervour. For this reason, many of us like to magnify healings and other miracles into advertisements and publicity opportunities for the gospel.

But Jesus did not want that man to go out and spread the news. Jesus wanted his identity as healer of the sick to remain secret. In verse 34, we read that Jesus would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was. Similarly, in chapter eight, Jesus asks the disciples, "Who do people say I am?" Peter replied, "You are the Christ." Jesus responded by warning the disciples not to tell anyone about him. That is the very opposite of what we might have expected. We want everyone to know about Jesus. But Jesus did not want everyone to know about him. What's going on?

Messianic secret

Why would Jesus want his disciples not to tell anyone about him? Here was the visible, flesh and blood, miracle-working Jesus walking and preaching all over the country. What better time for his followers to lead people to him and tell them who he was? Unlike today, when we must tell people to trust an invisible Jesus in faith, here Jesus was in the flesh. But Jesus was clear, strong, and even stern in saying, "Don't tell anyone who I am."

Perhaps one of the reasons Jesus gave this order lay in the expectations of the crowds who followed him. What did they want? What were they looking for?

In chapter 11, we find a clue. When Jesus entered Jerusalem the week before he was crucified, "many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields. Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted, 'Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our Father David! Hosanna in the highest!'" (Mark 11:8-10).

When people heard that Jesus was the Messiah, they were happy to receive the news. The problem lay in definitions and expectations. What

the people expected Messiah to be and to do was quite different from what Jesus the Messiah came to be and to do. The people expected a king who would rally the people, and with the blessing of God, lead them to victory over their Roman conquerors and restore the kingdom of David in all its glory. They did not understand what Messiahship was all about. Their idea of Messiah was different from God's idea of Messiah. When they heard the term, they misunderstood it, because they had been conditioned to expect something else.

With this in mind, it becomes clearer why Jesus did not want his disciples or those he healed to spread the news about him. It was not the right time for the people to hear. The right time for the news to spread was after Jesus had been executed and raised from the dead. Only then could the real purpose of God in sending Messiah be understood for what it was.

Lesson

In our world today, there are many concepts about God. If you talk to 10 people on the street, you will likely find 10 different opinions about who God is, what God is like, how God deals with humans and what God expects of us. Surveys by George Barna have shown that even among Christians, ideas about who Jesus is, what grace is and how it works, sin, forgiveness, faith, repentance, obedience, etc., vary widely. How much more do ideas about Jesus vary among non-Christians?

Suppose I approach a stranger sitting on a park bench and ask him if he knows Jesus. Suppose the stranger's idea of Jesus is that of a longhaired, wispy-looking weakling. Suppose his mother used to tell him that Jesus didn't like it when he played cards. Suppose his most frequent exposure to the word Jesus was on a dirty cardboard "Do you know Jesus" placard glued in the parking garage of his apartment building.

What would likely be the first impression this man would have of my question and me? Would that promote the gospel?

Suppose, on the other hand, I met the man, and over a period of time developed a relationship with him. Suppose we became friends. Suppose I was not a flagrant hypocrite and that my life and the way I treated this friend usually reflected the love of God. Suppose he found out, as friends

Study Supplement No. 20

usually do, that I was a Christian. Would that tend to change his flawed perspective on Jesus and Christianity to a more accurate one?

A time to plant...

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 points out that there is “a time for everything, a season for every activity under heaven” (New Living Translation). Among these are “a time to plant and a time to harvest” and “a time to be quiet and a time to speak up.” The time to spread the news about Jesus came after his resurrection, not during his ministry; until his resurrection, there could not be sufficient understanding of who he really was. Even the disciples were consistently ignorant about Jesus’ full identity and mission until after the resurrection (Mark 6:52; 8:17).

The same principle applies today—people are often not ready to hear and comprehend who Jesus is until they experience his resurrection life in his people, the church.

“Be careful how you live among your unbelieving neighbours. Even if they accuse you of doing wrong, they will see your honourable behaviour, and they will believe and give honour to God when he comes to judge the world” (1 Peter 2:12). Peter does not say, “Press your unbelieving neighbours for a decision.” His focus is on believers’ “honourable behaviour.” Why? Because through our honourable behaviour, our unbelieving neighbours see the living Christ in action. Peter says this will result in their belief at a time when God chooses (“when he comes to judge the world” implies God’s timing, not ours).

“Most important of all,” Peter says, is that we “continue to show deep love for each other” (1 Peter 4:8). In a similar vein, Paul wrote, “Whenever we have the opportunity, we should do good to everyone, especially to our Christian brothers and sisters” (Galatians 6:10).

Their instruction on evangelism centred on the witness of a godly life in Christ, not a well

rehearsed speech. It is our lives in him that show people who Jesus really is.

Accurate perception

“Instead,” Peter wrote, “you must worship Christ as Lord of your life. And if you are asked about your Christian hope, always be ready to explain it” (1 Peter 3:15). When a person asks about our Christian hope *because we live as though Christ is the Lord of our life*, then that person has a more accurate perspective of Jesus because he or she has seen Jesus in us. They ask because the Spirit prompts them, and the catalyst the Spirit uses is our godly behaviour in Christ, the Lord of our life.

And our conversation, Paul said, should be “gracious and effective so that you will have the right answer for everyone” (Colossians 4:6). People listen to friends. People listen to those who have proven they care. People listen when the relationship is real, not artificial.

Peter wrote: “God has given gifts to each of you from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Manage them well so that God’s generosity can flow through you” (1 Peter 4:10). God has richly blessed us with active parts in his work of building up the body of Christ, the church, and reaching out with the gospel to nonbelievers. The greatest tool he has given us is his own life, ministered to us by the Holy Spirit and reflected in the way we live.

Reflection:

- What gifts has God given you? How do you manage them?
- Does God’s generosity flow through you?
- Who is God nudging you to get to know better?
- When we pray for people, we tend to show them more active care. Which nonbelieving friends or neighbours are you actively praying for?

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