

BEYOND TODAY

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How idols diminish our sense of the majesty of God

Some might visualise idols as simply the “graven images” mentioned in the Old Testament. However, the intention of the first two of God’s commandments goes far beyond this.

In an increasingly secular world, it can be difficult to comprehend what an idol is in the biblical sense and why God despises them. Intrinsicly, anything we prioritise above God is an idol, because the first commandment forbids the worship of anything that is not the true God revealed in the pages of the Bible. He commands: “You shall have no other gods before Me,” proclaiming that He is the one and only God and that He is to be of greatest importance in our lives (Exodus 20:3).

The second commandment follows on, depicting how we are to view God: “You shall not make for yourself a carved image – any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God” (verses 4-5).

At first glance the second commandment may seem similar to the first. However there is a subtle distinction. The latter commands His people not to reduce God to the likeness of any physical object since any such representation distorts and limits our perception of what He is really like.

Wikipedia states: “An idol is an image or other material object representing a deity to which religious worship is addressed or any person or thing regarded with admiration, adoration, or devotion.”

The word “graven” means carved and can refer to anything made, be it of stone, wood, metal or any other material. By extension it can refer to any object, person or system which is intended to represent God.

God’s view of idols

The Almighty does not look favourably on acts of idol worship. The Old Testament is replete with accounts of Israel’s failures in this regard. From the time when God was leading them out of Egypt and the Israelites worshipped a golden calf (chapter 32), and throughout the time of the judges, they repeatedly slipped back into idolatry until God punished them and called a strong, righteous leader to put them back on track.

God commands His people not to reduce Him to the likeness of any physical object.

Solomon, the son of righteous King David, was led into idolatry by his many wives (1 Kings 11:1-8). For this reason, God divided the kingdom into two. Such practices continued through the time of the kings of Israel and many of Judah. Eventually God sent Israel into captivity

by the Assyrians and about 100 years later the same punishment was meted out to Judah at the hand of the Babylonians.

Not all were transgressors, however. In Babylon, scripture records the example of three captive Jewish men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, who would not bow down to King Nebuchadnezzar's image of gold even though he had instructed his subjects to worship it or face execution. God intervened to save them from the fiery furnace and brought them out unharmed (Daniel 3).

It is an affront to the Source of all life to make even what is intended to be a representation of the true God from inert materials. In the New Testament, the apostle Paul explained the dangers of following this practice: "For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man – and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things" (Romans 1:20-23).

Nothing made by human hands could ever come close to depicting God's majesty, power and glory.

The Israelites transgressed this when they began to worship a bronze serpent made by Moses. This had been kept, presumably as a reminder of the miracle associated with it (Numbers 21:5-9). Centuries later a chronicler recorded that a righteous king of Judah named Hezekiah "broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made; for until those days the children of Israel burned incense to it" (2 Kings 18:4). This shows how something of historical interest can become a talisman or object of worship.

Nothing made by human hands could ever come close to depicting God's majesty, power and glory. Paul asserts that it is folly to believe that an image of God honours Him. In the writings of the prophet Isaiah the Almighty Himself comments on this foolish practice (Isaiah 44:13-19 and 46:1-11). Elsewhere He declares, "I am the LORD, that is My name; and My glory I will not give to another, nor My praise to carved images" (Isaiah 42:8).

Modern-day idolatry

Today an array of potential idols is available to

consume our time, our thoughts and our energies. From cars to sport and film stars, from bingeing on box sets to excessive retail therapy, from gaming to addictions to various drugs, smoking and pornography, or simply drinking too much. Whatever we choose to devote our attention to can too easily become an idol, monopolising our time that would be better spent in becoming more like Christ (Philippians 2:5).

Still other idols abound in the shape of attitudes and behaviours. The prophet Samuel told the disobedient King Saul, "For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity *and idolatry*" (1 Samuel 15:23). Stubbornness in this context means a refusal to do what God has commanded and choosing to go one's own way instead. Arrogance, pride and self-will engulf humankind. Too often we follow our own paths, opinions and cherished beliefs rather than God's instructions, thus diminishing Him and exalting ourselves.

In Scripture, idolatry is also equated to coveting – the desire to acquire more possessions than we really need, or to own what belongs to others (Colossians 3:5). Today, particularly in the Western world, most people have so much, yet the desire to have even more or newer versions predominates. Paul tells us to "flee from idolatry" (1 Corinthians 10:14).

Warning for the end times

Jesus Christ revealed to the apostle John the sequence of events at the end of this age, just prior to His return. In the book of Revelation, John described ". . . a beast rising up out of the sea, having seven heads and ten horns, and on his horns ten crowns, and on his heads a blasphemous name" (Revelation 13:1). This "beast" receives power and authority from Satan. People all over the earth will worship him except those written in the Lamb's Book of Life (verse 8).

Thus these people are actually worshipping Satan and his demons: "But the rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands, that they should not worship demons, and idols of gold, silver, brass, stone, and wood, which can neither see nor hear nor walk" (Revelation 9:20-21).

God wants us to worship Him as He is. He despises objects that purport to represent Him but cannot glorify Him. Our relationship with Him is not physical in nature but spiritual. The apostle John quotes Jesus Christ as stating, "But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him" (John 4:23). Idols only diminish this relationship.

To study this topic more fully, please request our booklets *The Ten Commandments* and *Who Is God?*

David Payne

Knowledge that eases the dread of death

We all face the possibility of dying through an accident or some unexpected physical condition such as a stroke or heart attack. As we age we might make funeral plans, but do we really face up to the fear most of us have of death?

The Bible carries a clear message from the Creator of His offer and gift of eternal life by a resurrection. That offer has been verified by the life, death and resurrection to life of Jesus Christ. Following His resurrection, Jesus remained among His followers for 40 days teaching them about this incredible gift God offers. Hundreds of people saw and touched the resurrected Christ (1 Corinthians 15:1-6). As a result, thousands were filled with an incredible hope and confidence (Acts 2:41). His followers who once had fled in fear of death now boldly taught about life and salvation that was made possible only through Christ (Acts 4:12). Jesus taught that God will give eternal life to those who follow Him (John 10:28). He stated: “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:6).

Over the years I have been in the company of many who were facing death. There were some cases in which the end of life was almost a relief because of the physical suffering endured. Others kept hoping for a miracle and would do anything to stay alive. For younger ones diagnosed with a disease such as cancer it was a shock with

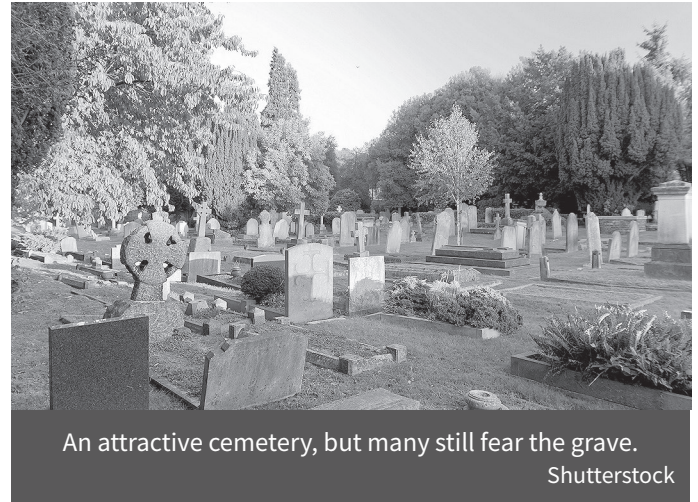
God the Creator actually places the concept, thought and hope for eternity into the hearts of all people (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

which they would wrestle for the remainder of their lives.

The Bible tells us that humans are subject to bondage our entire lives due to this fear of death (Hebrews 2:14-15). These verses also tell us that Satan the devil has the power of death and that Jesus Christ was sent to free mankind from this power.

Longing for something beyond death

All things that live must die, whether they be plants, animals, birds, fish or we humans. Humans, however, have imaginative minds that can develop fears and phobias



An attractive cemetery, but many still fear the grave.

Shutterstock

as and become anxious over much or little. When confronted by the death of another, we are reminded that we too will die. Nobody really wants to die, if death means fading away into the darkness and oblivion in which life no longer exists.

Within each of us stirs a strong glimmer of hope that there is something more – that death does not really mean the end. Once again, we can read in the Scriptures that God the Creator actually places the concept, thought and hope for eternity into the hearts of all (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

People have developed many ideas to convince themselves and others that life does not actually end at death. Many Christians believe they will continue to live in heaven in some form or another. Buddhists believe in Nirvana – an existence that is uncertain, but not death. Some believe we return in another living form having been reincarnated. Others believe that we continue to live in some beautiful and peaceful place. Many believe and fear that evildoers live in torment and misery in an ever-burning hell for eternity. [To study the validity of these beliefs please request or download our study guide *Heaven and Hell: What Does the Bible Really Teach?*]

In all of this thinking, we do not often find those who simply believe that when we die, life has ended and that's it. People can convince themselves of almost anything, but

the position often changes when they actually face death. That is the moment when doubts hit us, whether or not we want to admit it. We realise how completely helpless we are when our physical body fails. If there is not some kind of outside source to help us, there would be no hope that we could ever live again.

A promised resurrection requires an external force

The question about life after death has no doubt been pondered since man first grasped the concept of death. In general, humans have a long lifespan compared to most animals, so we repeatedly witness the death of living things. It is as though that were designed so that we would truly seek answers about living and dying.

When we die – when our body no longer functions – when we no longer respond to loved ones – will we ever live again? One man in the Bible asked that very question and concluded that only if there is an outside force, a Creator who loves and knows His creation and has a plan for all that is happening, can there be a hope of living again (Job 14:14-17).

Paul wrote that if there were no resurrection to life, our faith would be in vain (1 Corinthians 15:12-21). If Christ hadn't conquered death, there would be no hope. But Christ has risen and promises death will be destroyed (verses 54-55).

The gift of eternal life

The early followers of Jesus Christ made a complete turnaround in their thinking when they saw the resurrected Christ and realised that their destiny offered by God was to be raised from the dead and to become like the risen Christ (1 John 3:1-2). A man who once tried to destroy Jesus and His work came to understand that the

only way to eternal life was through Jesus Christ's life, death and resurrection. Paul did not witness the resurrection of Jesus but he knew close friends who had seen the risen Christ, and came to understand that through Christ the way to receive the gift of eternal life from God had been opened up to mankind (Ephesians 2:4-8).

The apostle Paul used the promised resurrection to encourage those who had lost loved ones (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). Salvation – eternal life after death – is a gift offered by God. Were we already immortal, there would have been no need for God to offer us eternal life.

The penalty for sin is death, but through the acceptance of Jesus Christ and obedience to God, the gift of God is eternal life (Romans 6:23). It is a gift that we cannot earn because we cannot atone for our own sins. God the Father cleanses the repentant and obedient human from all sin through the shed blood of His Son.

Paul explains that converted people are to walk in newness of life. We are now pure in God's sight, but as Paul pointed out, once a person is under grace – the mercy of God through His love – he or she must no longer practise sin, or we would lose that close relationship with God (Romans 6:14-17). We might slip up occasionally and need to request forgiveness for our failings but it is no longer how we seek to live (1 John 1:8-10 and 2:1-2).

Once we can grasp the wonder of the gift of eternal life that God offers and has always had in mind for humans, we cannot help but love Him. The dread of death is with us all, but through Christ, the hope of life after death through a resurrection can ease our concerns. God offers the way for our fear of death to be overcome.

To study this important topic further, please request or download our booklet *What Happens After Death?*

Robert Berendt

Why were you born?

What is your destiny? Why do you exist? Is there a reason, a purpose, for human life? These questions have baffled the greatest thinkers and philosophers down through the ages.

Think about your own existence. Can you see a purpose for your own life with its ups and downs, its mixture of joys and sorrows? Do you sense lasting value in its toil, challenges and uncertainties?

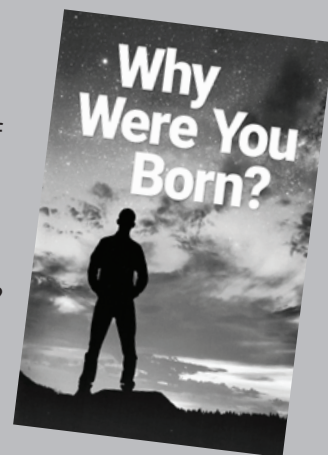
Consider what God said in Genesis 1:26: "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness." In all of God's physical creation, He made only man

in the image and likeness of Himself. Why?

Every human ever born has the potential for an incredible destiny.

Just why were you born? In our Bible study aid, we will explore one of the greatest of all mysteries.

Please request or download *Why Were You Born?* from the usual address.



Faith: Looking to God when challenges strike

From time to time we all lack faith. God requires that we trust Him no matter what.

When your husband is involved with motorbikes, the potential for a serious accident is always there. Our day finally arrived. A neighbour knocked on my door and announced, “Carl has had an accident.”

Carl and our grandson Jack had been riding a motocross bike in a nearby field about a ten-minute walk away. As I accompanied my neighbour, I started to focus my mind on certain things so that I would not “lose it.”

I prayed silently, “Father, you are in control and you know what has happened. You have allowed it. Your goal is to make us in your image. This event has happened and it is now a part of that process. It does not stop the process. It is a part of it.” Scriptures came to mind, such as: “All things work together for good”; “I will never leave you nor forsake you”; “God cannot lie.”

Enemies of faith

Recently, I had completed some interesting studies on the enemies of faith and on the master-slave relationship we have with God. I learned that to entertain any of the “enemies of faith” was not believing in God’s promises and power – effectively calling Him a liar. (A summary of these “enemies of faith” can be found in the box on page 22 of our booklet *You Can Have Living Faith*.)

I had never considered or understood this before. So as I hurried to my injured husband, I knew I was not to fear, worry, doubt, have any anxiety, or entertain any human reasoning, otherwise I would be sinning. Instead, I had to be in a state of faith. Recognising I couldn’t do this on my own, I asked God for His Spirit to help me.

Being God’s slave is not like the world’s view of slavery. Long ago, God invited me to be part of His purpose and, as I had woefully messed up my life, I willingly handed over control and became His slave, accepting Him as my Master. That is what happened then. However, the full understanding of the new relationship only became clearer as time went on.

As we hurried to the accident site, I continued to focus on the fact that God was not as concerned about the accident as He was about my response to Him in these circumstances. I knew He had the power to change

anything according to His will. I had to exercise faith that God was right there and would help us both through this situation as part of His purpose of making us in His image. For me, this was an exercise in trust and focus.

Carl was in a bad way. He had damaged a vertebra in his back and was in so much pain that the ambulance crew were unwilling to stretcher him across rough ground to their vehicle, so a helicopter was called. X-rays showed surgery would be required, and with significant chafing

around the spinal cord there was some doubt as to whether he would ever walk again. He was anointed by a Church elder prior to surgery (James 5:14-15) and then we had no choice but to leave matters in God’s hands.

About three weeks later Carl took his first steps and began a process of rehabilitation. Some six months later, he is able to walk normally, but tires after about twenty minutes. Further improvement is anticipated as Carl continues his exercise programmes. A specialist at a spinal unit informed



Carl making good progress

us that he is doing “remarkably well” for someone with his injuries. We are so grateful to God for His mercy.

It surprised me how calm I was that day and throughout Carl’s ordeal, which continues even now. Now I understand how, in the future when the world is totally trusting God as their Master (i.e., doing the same as I did on that day), then there will be no fear, no worry, no doubts, no anxiety and no human reasoning.

Marcia Torcetti

Frequently asked question:

How can you offer your literature free of charge?

Readers and viewers of *Beyond Today* often ask us, “How can you send out your literature without charge?”

Our calling is to preach the word of Jesus Christ and the gospel of His Kingdom (Matthew 28:19-20 and Mark 16:15). We take that commission seriously and do it in the way that He said to do it. He said, “Freely you have received, freely give” (Matthew 10:8). So, through the tithes and offerings of members, and donations from others who contribute to the Church, we’re able to offer literature free to those who request it.

Our readers come with diverse questions, many of which are addressed in the literature we offer to help them understand Scripture and the meaning of life. They can range from proving the veracity of the Bible to more complex issues such as doctrine. We want to help them learn what their destiny is, how they fit into God’s plan, and encourage them to grow into a deepening relationship with their Heavenly Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Preaching the gospel in the British Isles

In this part of the world, our work is done by a small group of part-time office staff and volunteers, with others working remotely. Although the bulk of the mailing of the *Beyond Today* magazine and the *British and European Supplement* is done by a mailing house, initial requests for literature are handled separately by the office. Usually people request booklets along with their subscription. Booklets are also sent in response to specific requests or queries.

Not all questions can be answered with a booklet, and office staff will answer many questions over the phone or by email. More complex questions are sent to members of our ministry for a written response.

New subscriber names and addresses mainly come in



from the Internet in a weekly file that we download. We do receive postal, phone and email requests as well.

The *Bible Study Course* lessons are sent out each month and returned tests marked and scores noted. The Church newspaper *United News* and the monthly British Isles bulletin (put together by the local ministry) are also sent from the office.

Financial contributions are handled by the office, as are payments including hall hire, wages and office supplies. As we are a

registered charity overseen by a board of trustees, the accounts are independently examined each year and a report sent to the Charity Commission.



the printer. It meets up with the *Beyond Today* magazine at the mailing house.

With a largely volunteer workforce, together with the generosity of Church members and others, God has blessed us with the funds needed to send out our literature without charge to our 8,000 or so subscribers.

This Supplement is compiled remotely until it is in its final stages, when it goes to the office for final editing and formatting before being sent to



Q I got saved some years ago but I feel I have let God down, as I have sinned a lot since then. Is it “once saved, always saved”?

Subscriber in Newport

A The Bible does not talk about “once saved, always saved,” neither in terminology nor in principle. After his conversion, the apostle Paul made it clear that even he could actually fall away spiritually (1 Corinthians 9:27). In Hebrews 10:26 we are warned, “For if we sin wilfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins.” Hebrews 6:4-6 again highlights this point. But as long as we repent, God will always forgive us.

In these verses and others we see that it is possible for a disciple to lose out on salvation, even after repentance, baptism and the receipt of God’s Holy Spirit. This shows that the Bible doesn’t teach “once saved, always saved.”

Salvation is a gift from God. We can never earn it by keeping the laws of God. Sin is the “transgression of [God’s] law” (1 John 3:4, King James Version). Sin brings death and no one except Christ kept God’s laws perfectly,

so we are all under the death penalty. Upon our repentance and baptism Christ willingly takes on that death penalty – the “curse of the law” – for us and redeems us (Galatians 3:13). The apostle Paul tells us in Romans 7:12, “The law is holy and the commandment holy and just and good.” But none of us keep it fully and as a result we are dependent on Christ’s atoning sacrifice for continuing forgiveness and eventual salvation.

The Bible encourages us to lead a spiritually upright life based on the laws of God. This cannot save us but keeps us in a close relationship with God which a life of sin would negate. Only Christ’s death and resurrection opens the door to our salvation. Christ declared, “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son” (John 3:16) in order for us to appreciate that we are saved by God’s mercy and Christ’s atoning death.

For more insight, please read our Bible study aid *Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion*.

Q Why does Christ only reign for 1,000 years and then Satan is released again? (Revelation 20:7-10).
Subscriber in Birmingham

A Much about the millennium is revealed to us, but not every detail. We realise that some things are known to God alone (Deuteronomy 29:29).

In answering specific questions, we can give probabilities or possibilities based on what scripture says. At the beginning of Revelation 20, it states: “Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. He laid hold of the dragon, that serpent of old, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years; and he cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal on him, so that he should deceive the nations no more till the thousand years were finished. But after these things he must be released for a little while” (Revelation 20:1-3).

So Satan’s deception will be halted for the whole 1,000-year period. In regard to him being “released” for a brief period at the end of the millennium before being removed forever (Revelation 20:10), it would appear that God is allowing Satan to test those who have lived in the millennium to see how firm their convictions are. This explanation seems likely, as verse 10 mentions “the devil that deceived them.” However, it wouldn’t explain why earlier generations of people in the millennium appear not to be tested in the same way.

Beyond this final rebellion is the second resurrection and the judgement (verses 11-15). Then comes the new heaven and new earth, where only righteousness exists and Satan is gone (Revelation 21). Our study aids *Christ’s Reign on Earth* and *The Book of Revelation Unveiled* go into more detail about the millennium and beyond.

Let the Bible Answer...

What does the Bible say about the kind of speech we should use?

That we should bless others and not curse them is found in Luke 6:28; Romans 12:14; James 3:8-10.

Taking care when speaking about dignities (rulers and those in authority) is covered in Ecclesiastes 10:20; 2 Peter 2:9-11; Jude 8-10.

Colossians 4:6 and Titus 3:1-2 describe how we should speak to other people.



Letters From Our Readers

Certain hope in uncertain times

Please could you send me the booklet *Christ's Reign on Earth: What It Will Be Like?* We live in such uncertain times, which is becoming more evident daily. Here in the UK our country is being torn apart by Brexit and it is good to know ultimately our God reigns and His will will be done. Thank you for the excellent magazine *Beyond Today*.

Reader in Newton Abbott

We are living in strange times. Sometimes I shake my head in absolute despair. I know our Redeemer is coming, however, which fills me with hope for mankind.

Reader in Wellingborough

Inspirational Bible Course

I found Lesson 8 very inspiring. It explains thoroughly the need for baptism and also the gift of the Holy Spirit. I'm looking forward to the next lesson.

Student in Ireland

Thank you for truly inspirational teaching. Lesson 4 has helped me so much in my current trials. God's timing is perfect as always.

Student in Doncaster

Contemporary application of God's word

Invaluable reading, comment and contemporary application of the living word. Thank you.

Reader in Salisbury

I like your interesting sometimes prophetic articles on current events and political matters and their inter-

pretations in modern-day situations.

Reader in Southend-on-Sea

Thank you for *Beyond Today* magazine. I really thank you for your views and truth of Bible prophecy.

Reader in Wincanton

Bible study aids appreciated

Thank you for helping me to improve my Bible studies.

Reader from Ireland

Thank you for your wonderful booklets – short and concise and an excellent guide for reading my Bible.

Reader in Dorset

Great range of topics

A really useful magazine, especially *The British and European Supplement*. Such a great range of topics and all based on scripture. I love the Q&As.

Reader in Shropshire

Should you want to cancel

I did not order your magazine. Please take my name off your list.

Addressee in Northern Ireland

Editor's comment: Sometimes we receive requests from those who think friends or neighbours might be interested in Beyond Today magazine; occasionally we receive mischievous or nuisance requests. Unfortunately we are unable to differentiate between these and genuine requests.

If someone asks to have their name removed from our mailing list, then we do so. We have no wish to cause offence by sending material to someone who does not want it.

How this work is supported

The outreach work of the United Church of God in the British Isles, including the production of this Supplement to *Beyond Today* magazine, is carried out by a small team of part-time employees, together with the efforts of unpaid volunteers.

Distribution of *Beyond Today* magazine, this Supplement and other literature of the United Church of God is funded by the generosity of Church members, co-workers and readers. Jesus Christ instructed His disciples that as they had freely received they were to freely give (Matthew 10:8), so we supply our literature free of charge, making Christ's message available to all. Our gratitude goes to those who assist financially in this aspect of the Church's work.

Donations may be sent to *Beyond Today* or United Church of God, PO Box 705, Watford WD19 6FZ, United Kingdom; or online at www.ucg.org.uk/donate.html through PayPal. Donations can also be made directly to our bank account. Please contact us for details.

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