

# BEYOND TODAY

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## Festivals: A reality check

*Something innate in us yearns to be part of festive occasions. Genuinely meaningful celebrations can bond a family, a people, a nation together. Without a true purpose, though, festivals can become a burden.*

Most of us love a get-together, especially one with festivities. There are all kinds of festivals, some wholesome, some less so. Festivals may be national, social, commemorative and of course religious in nature. We may feel the need to celebrate special events associated with our nation. For example, the United States commemorates 4th July, France 14th July, and many other countries 1st May. Britain has bank holidays, usually on Mondays, and often with a reputation for pouring rain!

We might ask ourselves though, what value do they have for you or for me? To the general public these festivities are a break from the more mundane chores of life. They may serve as a mini, one-day holiday, much enjoyed by children and adults alike.

### Banning celebrations left a void

In England in the mid-17th century a remarkable phenomenon took place during the five-year rule of Oliver Cromwell, Lord Protector of the country. There was no celebration of any festival. Christmas was banned altogether on account of its non-Christian origin, having been established by Rome in the mid-fourth century AD in an attempt to “Christianise” deeply entrenched pre-Christian celebrations such as Saturnalia and Yule. From there its observance had spread to other European capitals. Under the Lord Protector, 25th December was designated a normal working day and Parliament was in session.

Cromwell, who was considered a Puritan, faced two



Family gatherings can be enjoyable and bonding, but especially so when enhanced by observances that truly honour God.

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challenges: Firstly, his elder son and prospective heir had died, and his second son wasn't interested in following in his father's footsteps. The other complication was that many Puritans had emigrated and settled in New England in the 17th century, and they would likely have lent Cromwell their support. After his death in 1658, the country reverted to the previously proscribed celebrations.

From a biblical perspective the banning of Christmas and other non-biblical festivals was a sound decision. Where Cromwell and the Puritans erred was failing to replace 25th December and other celebrations with the

festivals that the early Christian Church observed.

Outlawing Christmas created a spiritual void in the religious life of the people which ought to have been filled by the biblical Holy Days. The Bible teaches that in worship only festivals ordained by God should be kept.

### Meaningful festivals

Whilst the observance of national commemorations which have no religious content or don't mock the Judeo/Christian morality can be left up to the individual, when it comes to religious celebrations the Bible must always have the last word. These need to have a divine origin. If proven to be truly divinely inspired, they would be the most meaningful, the most significant, the most attractive of all festivals – and of course should be kept!

A religion without appointed holy days or without a specified weekly day of worship is nothing more than a philosophy, lacking substance and spiritually deficient.

***God's holy days illustrate His purpose, step by step. They reveal God's plan for mankind and how that will be achieved.***

Religious festivals should direct us to the ultimate purpose in life and answer the question: Why are we here? Unfortunately, no secular philosophy can provide the solution to that. Only a church which embraces the biblical festivals and holy days can understand and teach humanity's ultimate purpose. God's holy days illustrate that purpose, step by step. They reveal our reason for existing. They reveal God's plan for mankind and how that will be achieved. Each festival explains one of the steps in that plan and the centrality of Christ to it. That is why they are essential to keep annually.

### Critical part of worship

Festivals of truly divine origin cannot share beliefs and practices of other religions. Combining truth with error isn't good enough for a God of truth. "God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:24). There can be no syncretism of beliefs that are biblical in origin with those of human origin. They just don't mix, as Jesus tells us plainly in Matthew 9:16-17. He reminds us: "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God'" (Matthew 4:4).

The feasts, including the Sabbath, as listed in Leviticus 23 are genuine – the true "feasts of the LORD". Days that come from edicts of any other non-biblical source are substitutes, plain and simple. God warns: "Whatever I

command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it" (Deuteronomy 12:32). Many, including churches, ignore this instruction, but man has no right to decide how to worship God and when to assemble for worship. That script has already been written.

Ignoring or usurping the Almighty's authority isn't an option. A day of reckoning will come for those who add to or take away from fundamental beliefs and practices that are biblically based!

The Bible remains silent about individuals like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph keeping any divinely appointed festivals. The patriarchs that God dealt with were nomadic for much of their lives. God called the patriarchs individually and made special demands on them (for example, Genesis 17:1 and 26:5). It was at the Exodus that God began to call the descendants of Abraham. No longer isolated individuals, but a people – the Israelites – they now required holy days and festivals. Apart from the Sabbath, known from Creation, God introduced the Israelites to feasts that were brand new. The Holy Days weren't copied from the religions of other nations (Genesis 2:2-3; Hebrews 4:9-10).

### Biblical holy days fill the spiritual void

By keeping these days holy, we reaffirm that they are the only feasts sanctioned in the Bible. We should celebrate genuine days and festivals that have a divine origin, deep significance, explain our purpose in detail and fill the hunger in each of us for a connection with God.

The world at large has instead opted for counterfeit days and festivals that have no biblical basis and lack spiritual meaning. Celebrating such days may lead to spending large sums of money in an attempt to fill what is actually a spiritual void, often resulting in feelings of emptiness and let-down and, quite often, violence and outbursts of anger.

God's Holy Days transcend all other religious days and festivities. According to *Chambers 20th Century Dictionary*, the verb *transcend* means to rise above, to surmount, to surpass, to exceed, to pass beyond the limit of. God's festivals do just that!

The Passover and the seven holy days or festivals give direction on every phase of God's plan of salvation. The Holy Days serve as a complete package in answering the question: Why are we here and what obligations do we bear. How can anyone, how can any church, refuse to keep the holy days that reveal so much about our ultimate destiny?

To learn more of God's Holy Days please request or download our Bible study aids *God's Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind* and *Holy Days or Holydays: Does It Matter Which Days We Observe?*

Gerhard Marx

# God's longed-for home

*Scripture indicates our Creator's desire to live among His people, but where will that dwelling place be?*

In the Garden of Eden, the garden of God, the Creator and the two humans He had made had a free and open relationship. Then someone else forced his way into that relationship, breaking it apart (Genesis 3:1-19). Having been persuaded by Satan to eat of the forbidden "tree of the knowledge of good and evil," Adam and Eve hid themselves from God. Then, lest the man and woman take of the "tree of life" at that time and live forever in their sinful state, they were driven from the Garden by the LORD God Himself (Genesis 3:22-24).

Many centuries later, in the days of Moses, God instructed the children of Israel to make Him a sanctuary or sacred place, so that He might dwell among the people He had chosen for Himself and rescued from slavery. This tabernacle of meeting with its altar, along with the priests in the line of Aaron, were all consecrated so that the Almighty would dwell among the children of Israel and be their God. Additionally, the children of Israel would know that He was the LORD their God (Exodus 25:1-9; 29:44-46).

More centuries passed in the history of the children of Israel. Along the journey there had been the Tabernacle of Meeting and then Solomon's Temple. Then there was the Roman occupation of the Holy Land – at the time when Herod's Temple graced Jerusalem.

## **Immanuel: God With Us**

The apostle John explained that the Word became flesh as Jesus Christ (John 1:1-14). In His pre-incarnate form as the Logos, or Word, Jesus had "made all things that were made" (verse 3; see also Ephesians 3:9; Colossians 1:16 and Hebrew 1:1-2). He walked in the Garden with Adam and Eve, spoke with Noah and Abraham, had a tent for a dwelling place among the Hebrews (2 Samuel 7:5-7) and later a temple. In an act of love to His Father and to His human creation, He emptied Himself of His

glory to taste life as a physical human being and to die to become the Saviour of those willing to repent, obey God and take on Christ's very mind (Philippians 2:5-8). In this way, the breach in the relationship in the Garden of Eden could be reconciled. (To learn more of Jesus before His human birth please request or download our study aid *Jesus Christ: The Real Story.*)

Living amongst humans for 33½ years, Jesus experi-

enced firsthand the suffering caused by mankind's sins, yet was without sin Himself. In compassion He healed the sick, raised the dead and preached a message which, if acted upon, would begin to release them from their bondage to Satan.

Through His resurrection, Jesus became the "firstborn" of the dead implying there would be others to follow.

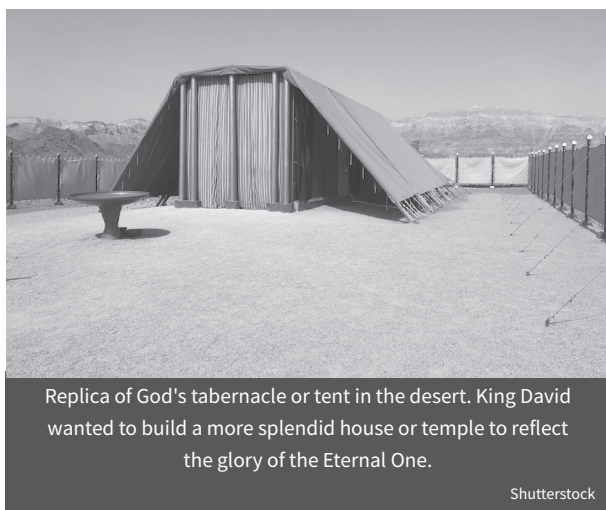
1 Corinthians 15, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-16 and Revelation 20:4-6 explain this change or birth into the Family of God in more detail. Jesus promised His disciples He would return to rule the earth in righteousness and dwell with them again (Matthew 19:28; John 14:3).

## **Testimony of Stephen the deacon**

During the early days of the New Testament Church of God, a deacon called Stephen found himself on trial for his life. In his defence he reviewed the history of God's relationship with mankind here on the earth.

He spoke of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph and of the children of Israel in the time of Moses. He recalled a time when their ancestors had a tabernacle, or tent, of witness in the wilderness (Acts 7:44). This was where God dwelt among the children of Israel.

He spoke of Joshua, and of David who found favour before God and had enquired about a more permanent dwelling for the God of Jacob (2 Samuel 7:1-13). This led to him stockpiling materials so his son Solomon could build



Replica of God's tabernacle or tent in the desert. King David wanted to build a more splendid house or temple to reflect the glory of the Eternal One.

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a temple. During the dedication of the newly completed temple in Jerusalem all Israel were assembled and God gave a visible token of His presence (1 Kings 8:10-11). From a scaffold made of brass, Solomon knelt to pray. In his prayer he asked a rhetorical question: “But will God indeed dwell on the earth?” (1 Kings 8:27).

In Acts 7:48, Stephen the deacon made a similar assertion: “However, the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands . . .”

At his conclusion, Stephen scolded the high priest and the council for murdering Christ as they had persecuted the prophets of old. They proceeded to cast Stephen out of the city and had him stoned to death.

### **How God lives with us today**

After Christ’s resurrection, another gift was sent from God to those He was calling. With a sound from heaven, as a rushing mighty wind, the Holy Spirit was given and filled the disciples (Acts 2:1-4). It was sent so that the Father and Christ could live within individual men and women.

***Jesus promised His disciples He would return to rule the earth in righteousness and dwell with them again (Matthew 19:28; John 14:3).***

Through this Spirit which joins with our human spirit we understand more clearly the words of Christ and are enabled to keep His commandments. Jesus answered and said to him, “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him” (John 14:23). He elaborates in His prayer to the Father: “I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me” (John 17:23).

Isaiah the prophet seems to have been given some insight into how God’s dwelling place would extend from inanimate buildings to living flesh and blood; to the “house” of those who are said to be “poor and of a contrite spirit” and tremble at God’s word” (Isaiah 66:1-2).

In 2 Corinthians 6:1, 16, Paul pleaded with God’s people not to receive the grace of God in vain, because they are the temple of the living God.

From the perspective of a disciple today, this dwelling or tabernacling with God through His Holy Spirit is the relationship we are blessed to have with God right now.

### **A glimpse of the future**

Christ, through the apostle John, provided us with a glimpse of the future. This will be the greatest ever change in mankind’s affairs, when God’s Kingdom under Jesus Christ is established on the earth.

This is when Jesus, who is King of kings and Lord of lords, comes to dwell permanently with mankind (Revelation 11:15; 19:11-16).

With this event, and because of the direct dwelling of God with mankind, everything will change. Verses in Isaiah 25:6-9, alongside many other prophetic passages, provide us with a flavour of the radical transformation to come upon the Earth: blessings, enlightenment, the knowledge of God, happiness and joy, and eternal life.

Finally in the biblical revelation we see God the Father dwelling with mankind (Revelation 21:1-5). God Himself comes to earth to tabernacle with mankind – the completion of what we can only conclude has been His intention all along.

We might think that this event marks the finale in the story of God tabernacling with mankind, His children. For God’s family it will be the beginning of a new life – His spirit-born children eternally living with their Heavenly Father and with their Saviour and elder brother Jesus Christ.

I didn’t write this story, mankind didn’t write this story or its ongoing chapters; this comes from God Himself, and He has gently and progressively revealed it to those who love and obey Him (1 Corinthians 2:6-10).

Solomon’s rhetorical question: “Will God indeed dwell on the earth?” really amounts to the question “will God indeed dwell on the earth with mankind?”

The answer is a resounding “YES!” God has, God is, and God will!

To Stephen’s assertion that “the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands”, whatever the modern scientific world view may promote, the reality is that the world as we know it and mankind within it did not make itself. God has been involved all along. He made humankind in His own image, to be His people. He sent His firstborn Son to pay a ransom price with His life to rescue those who would be born as His children at the first resurrection.

Then He will walk among them, dwell in them and with them and remain their God and Father forever.

To study man’s purpose further, please request or download our booklet *Why Were You Born?*

*David Fenney*

# Lessons from the wilderness

*Once we are baptised and have received the gift of the Holy Spirit our journey towards salvation really begins. We gain a glimpse of the methods God employs to help us reach this goal when we compare our experience to the wanderings of the Israelites.*

**W**hen leading the children of Israel out of Egypt, God could have chosen an easier, straightforward route, but He didn't. He could have made the path travelled more direct. Why? We could liken the road we're currently travelling towards salvation to that taken by the Israelites – winding and indirect. In order to inherit God's Kingdom, there'll be many a twist and turn along the way.

Initially, the process of coming out of bondage in Egypt wasn't supposed to take 40 years. Shortly after crossing the Red Sea, God instructed Moses to send 12 men to scout out the area of Canaan which He had chosen as the promised land in which the Israelites were to dwell. Two of them – Caleb and Joshua – returned with a good report, whereas others doubted their ability to conquer such a strong, fearsome people living in such reinforced, secure cities and thus brought back a negative report (Numbers 13:1-3, 27-33, 14:6-8).

## **A lack of faith**

The latter group convinced the community to fear the Canaanites and abandon any hope of seizing their land, even inciting the congregation to stone Caleb and Joshua (Numbers 14:10). With this, God admonished the rebels for provoking and testing Him due to their lack of faith in His promises to them, "How long will these people reject Me? And how long will they not believe Me, with all the signs which I have performed among them? I will strike them with the pestilence and disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they" (Numbers 14:11-12).

Do we sometimes lack faith in God's promises to us which causes us to take our own path apart from Him? Do we travel our own winding road, unwilling to depend on our Lord wholeheartedly to meet our every need?

God was so bitterly displeased with those who refused to heed His voice that He threatened to cut them off completely. Moses interceded for them, but the Almighty decreed: "They certainly shall not see the land of which I swore to their fathers, nor shall any of those who rejected Me see it . . . According to the number of the days in which you spied out the land [of Canaan], forty days, for

each day you shall bear your guilt one year, namely forty years, and you shall know My rejection" (Numbers 14: 23-34).

The day-for-a-year or year-for-a-day principle is a method of interpretation of Bible prophecy in which the word "day" is considered to be symbolic of a year of actual time. God prolonged His people's journey through the wilderness in a bid to help them understand that their murmurings against Him were actually counterproductive, the outcome ending up being far worse than they might have imagined.

Similarly, if we do not heed the word of God and act in accordance with His commandments, although He is merciful to His creation ultimately man's disobedience will come at a price: "The LORD is long suffering and abundant in mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression; but He by no means clears the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation" (Numbers 14:18. See also 1 Corinthians 10:1-11).



Wilderness terrain in western Saudi Arabia

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Understanding the process God uses for us to learn about His ways and the expectations He places upon us to conform to His standards is important because it highlights a pattern that has beset mankind since creation – namely that the fleshly mind and heart is enmity against the Almighty (Romans 8:7, Galatians 5:16).

## A disciple's progress

At baptism we are immersed fully under water to symbolically wash away our sins. This is only the start though and, as such, our physical human nature is still firmly intact. Progress is obtained by increasing and maintaining our focus on spiritual matters, trying not to get too sidetracked by everyday occurrences. With God's help, we must consciously choose to grow and overcome. Implementing the following strategies could be helpful:

1. Coupled with prayer, make a concerted effort to study the Bible daily – even if only a short period can be managed.
2. Be willing to sacrifice the desires of our human nature which longs to be disobedient to God.
3. Concentrate on putting to death the “old man,” that is, how we were prior to baptism.
4. Look to God to increase our faith in Him to help

suppress our natural tendency to sin.

Our efforts involve growing and overcoming, motivated by faith and guided by God's Holy Spirit. We see this illustrated by the Israelites in the wilderness. God led them, but they would never have reached the Promised Land had they not followed the cloud (Numbers 9:15-22).

With God's help, we can continue to change and lead our lives in a way that pleases Him. “Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance; but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct” (1 Peter 1:13-15).

Here is where our own pilgrimage to the Kingdom of God truly begins in earnest.

*Ademola Adesupo*

# The power of God's word

*Faith and obedience work together with miraculous results.*

**H**aving faith comes about as we hear, study and meditate upon God's laws consistently, making them an integral part of our life. “Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10:17). Obey God's instructions and results will follow.

God's power manifests itself the moment you act upon His commands in faith. We cannot profess to have received the truth and then not act upon it. Neither can we say we have faith and do nothing (James 2:14-7). We should ask Almighty God to help us accept what He says and have the faith to perform His instructions. By doing so, the power of God's word will transform your life

In Luke 5:4-7 we read how Peter and his friends had toiled all night with their fishing nets but had caught nothing. These were professional fishermen; perhaps their fathers and grandfathers before them had fished the same waters many times. Jesus told them to “launch out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.” Peter replied, “Master, we have toiled all night and have caught nothing; nevertheless at Your word I will let down the net” (verses 4-5). Peter and his friends acted in faith, which, seen from a purely human point of view, contradicted their professional experience as fishermen. Accepting without ques-



Young Middle Eastern fisherman in a traditional recreational fishing boat.

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tion and acting upon Jesus' words, Peter and the others let down their nets and caught a great deal of fish, so many in fact that their nets were breaking. By acting in complete faith, relying totally upon the power of God's word, the results were miraculous.

God is a miracle-working God. He will perform amazing feats for each one of us if we just believe and possess the faith to put His words into action in our daily lives.

*Terry Oldfield*





**Q** I don't keep the feasts listed in Leviticus 23. My pastor says we would have to keep all the Old Testament laws if we kept those feasts. Why is it necessary, since we don't sacrifice anymore?

FAQ

**A** In brief, the United Church of God observes the festivals outlined in Leviticus 23 because they were commanded by God in the Old Testament and that command was never abrogated in the New Testament. Jesus Christ observed them, as did His apostles and the New Testament Church long after His death (Luke 22:15; 1 Corinthians 5:6-8; Acts 2:1; 18:21; 20:16). We should follow their example (1 John 2:6; 1 Peter 2:21; 1 Corinthians 11:1).

In introducing His command to keep these festivals, God makes an important point: "These are my appointed feasts, the appointed feasts of the Lord, which you are to proclaim as sacred assemblies" (Leviticus 23:2, New International Version). Many assume these feasts are only for the Jews. Yet God clearly tells us they are *His* feasts, not the feasts of any particular ethnic or religious group. Further, He says they are His "sacred assemblies" – appointed times or divine appointments when He commands His people to gather before Him.

One of the major flaws in mainstream Christianity today is how the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible is generally viewed. Over the centuries there has been an enormous effort to cut Christianity off from its roots by claiming that much of the Old Testament is no longer applicable or necessary to the Christian life. Yet the New Testament itself emphasises the importance of the Old Testament.

The apostle Paul wrote to Timothy: "... From childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction,

for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:15-17).

There was no New Testament when Timothy was a child. The "Holy Scriptures" to which Paul referred were what is today called the Old Testament.

The New Testament mentions Jesus, the apostles or members of the early Church observing six of the seven annual feast days. Only the Feast of Trumpets is not mentioned. But the event that this particular annual Holy Day heralds – Jesus Christ's return – is mentioned prominently in the New Testament (see 1 Corinthians 15:50-57).

### **Christ central to all God's festivals**

Few realise that these biblical festivals teach us the major steps in God's plan for the salvation of mankind. Passover, for example, foreshadowed the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ as the Redeemer of mankind (1 Corinthians 5:7). The Feast of Unleavened Bread depicts the necessity of Christians to remove sin from their lives and live a new, sinless life in Christ (verses 7-8).

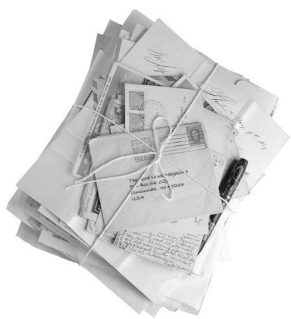
The Feast of Pentecost, also called the Feast of Firstfruits, foreshadowed the founding of Jesus Christ's Church, made up of those who are the firstfruits in God's plan of salvation (James 1:18; Revelation 14:4). God founded that Church on the Feast of Pentecost when He placed His Spirit in the 120 disciples gathered in Jerusalem (Acts 2). In every sense these are truly Christian Holy Days, as they revolve around Christ's role in God's plan.

Observance of the Holy Days does not obligate us to keep the law of sacrifices today. The Holy Days were in force prior to the sacrificial system being instituted. Since the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in A.D. 70, there is no Levitical priesthood to offer sacrifices or a place designated by God at which they can be offered.

Had we a temple and a priesthood, animal sacrifices would still not be required for Christians today because the one great sacrifice Christ made, by giving His life, rendered them redundant in this Church age (Hebrews 9:11-14; 10:1-14). This is one of the major points expressed in the book of Hebrews.

The apostle Peter made it clear that the Church is "a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, [called] to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5). Those sacrifices include our prayers to God as well as the presentation of our lives as a living sacrifice meaning a life that is dedicated to living God's way and keeping His laws (Romans 12:1)

To read more about all of the annual biblical festivals and their meaning, we suggest you read our booklet *God's Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind*.



## Letters From Our Readers

### Information for our day

Please continue to send me the *Beyond Today* magazine. I find it an interesting read. The articles are relevant to the current times.

*Reader in Hayle*

Thank you very much for these magazines. They have been an amazing lifeline and source of knowledge. Very topical subjects.

*Reader in London*

Thank you for sending me this magazine. I enjoy reading so much information one doesn't hear anywhere else.

*Reader in Coleraine*

Very many thanks for your brilliant magazines and booklets, each one easy to read yet informative and biblically correct, with quotations from the Bible to support your writings.

*Reader in Belfast*

### United News

Thank you for sending me a

copy of *United News*. I would like to receive it regularly. It was really lovely to see the families and children in Ghana and to read about what the United Church of God is doing internationally.

*Reader in Salisbury*

### Eye-opening and challenging

Thank you for sending me your magazine. I find it helpful – and challenging!

*Reader in Essex*

Very informative and good to have another perspective.

*Reader in Ireland*

Thank you for your commitment to teaching us more about the Bible. You have opened my eyes and answered many questions I once had.

*Reader in Bangor*

*Beyond Today* magazine makes an informative eye opener, most especially all those findings that [prove] the truth about God.

*Reader in Northolt*

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## Let the Bible answer...

### What does the Bible teach about the lake of fire?

*Christ called this lake of fire "hell", or gehenna, which was a burning rubbish tip outside Jerusalem. It destroyed anything physical thrown into it leaving only ashes: Malachi 4:1-3; Matthew 10:28; Hebrews 10:26-31.*

*This is synonymous with the "second death" from which there is no resurrection: Revelation 20:13-15; 21:8.*

*The apostle Peter indicated that fire will engulf the entire earth before the new heavens and new earth are made: 2 Peter 3:10-13.*