

Gun Violence— God's Plan to Stop It

***“They shall beat
their swords into
plowshares, and
their spears into
pruninghooks. . . .
They shall sit every
man under his vine
and under his fig
tree; and none
shall make them
afraid: for the
mouth of the LORD
of hosts hath
spoken it.”
—Micah 4:3,4***

AS THE WORLD ATTEMPTS to chart a path for its guidance in the year which has so recently begun, it does so with fear and misgivings. The package of unresolved troubles that the old year left on the doorstep of 2016 makes an unwelcome gift. Although the intentions of many are likely admirable, the difficulties of today seem to be outside the ability of the world's governing authorities to resolve. Beyond this, there is no way of knowing what additional and perhaps unanticipated problems the months ahead will bring forth.

In the United States, one of the many unresolved problems from past years is that of gun violence. Although most all will agree that gun violence is a major problem, governmental leaders and much of the American population are polarized in their

view of how to deal with it. This has resulted in a renewed, and hotly-contested, debate concerning gun control. Ironically, this debate seems nearly as impassioned as many of the motivations behind the crimes which are committed with guns and other weapons.

RECENTLY IN THE NEWS

Adding fuel to the ongoing arguments about gun control, during the first week of the new year, President Barack Obama announced several executive orders designed to expand background checks and place more restrictions on firearms sold under certain circumstances. The main focus of the President's plan is to implement tighter rules on sales by unlicensed dealers, such as those who sell online and at gun shows. Those new rules would require such dealers to obtain a federal seller's license and also to check the backgrounds of all their buyers.

As expected, opponents of the President's announcement claim that such action undercuts the Second Amendment "right to bear arms," by making it harder for law-abiding citizens to obtain firearms. Many also assert that it is simply another method whereby the government can increase its control of American's private lives, and thereby further limit freedom.

Still others argue that the government would do better by focusing more on earlier and better detection, and improved treatment of those with mental illness which causes them to be dangerous. This assertion, while certainly having validity, only emphasizes an underlying question: Is the problem

of gun violence rooted in the character of the person who commits a crime, or in the weapon that is used to carry it out?

On the one hand, a gun, sword, knife, or any other weapon is an object incapable of murdering or maiming anyone unless it is used for that purpose by the hand of a person wielding it. Conversely, it is clear that the sole purpose of the manufacture of any firearm or other weapon, aside possibly from its use as a hunting device, is to kill or injure another person when utilized. So, we ask again, wherein lies the problem—with the weapon, or with the user?

ONLY BY GOD'S WISDOM

It is not our purpose to take sides in the gun control debate, nor even to enter its confines. When we look into the Scriptures and see God's eternal purposes, we realize that fallen man's futile attempts to resolve the problems of violence, murder, war, and to control the weapons used in these activities, will not succeed, regardless of which side of the debate one espouses. Only God's wisdom and power can solve this and the many other severe problems facing today's sin-sick and weary world.

Viewing mankind's experience on earth thus far, one fact is clear. Every one of the billions who have ever lived on this planet has died. It is also no doubt true that the vast majority have died for reasons other than the attacks of guns, bombs, swords, or other weapons. Many, in fact, would be inclined to say that most people die "from natural causes." While this sounds logical, perhaps, to human reasoning, it is not what the Scriptures say.

A MURDERER

The Word of God informs us that death, in all forms, has existed among mankind because they have been the victims of “murder,” committed by none other than Satan. Jesus stated that the devil was “a murderer from the beginning,” and “there is no truth in him. . . . he is a liar, and the father of it.” (John 8:44) The Scriptures further confirm that “the Devil, and Satan,” are one and the same as “that old serpent,” who plotted murder against our first parents.—Rev. 20:2

The “murder” of Adam and Eve was not done with a gun, sword, or any other tangible weapon. Rather, as suggested in the above words of Jesus, Satan’s weapons were lies and deceit. By subtly using these against our first parents, he convinced them that they would somehow benefit, and not die, from disobeying the clear and simple commandment of God, and so they partook of the forbidden fruit. The dying process beginning immediately, Adam and Eve eventually succumbed to Satan’s murderous attack, dying and returning unto dust, “for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.”—Gen. 2:17; 3:19

The entire human race, all who have come out of the loins of Adam, have subsequently died. The Apostle Paul states the matter simply, “In Adam all die.” (I Cor. 15:22) All have gone into the grave, whether from weapons of war, the violence of guns, the slaying of swords, or from the “natural causes” of sickness and disease. All have experienced this great human tragedy because of the one who was a “murderer from the beginning.”

RECOVERY OF VICTIMS PROMISED

Thankfully, our loving Heavenly Father has infinitely more power than Satan. In due time, God will destroy this murderer of the race—"the devil that deceived" mankind. (Rev. 20:10) Just as importantly, God also has unending love for his human creation, and has made provision for man's recovery from death by means of the ransom sacrifice of his "only begotten Son." (John 3:16) As a result of this provision of the ransom, Jesus' promise will surely come to pass, that "the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, And shall come forth."—John 5:28,29

Under the righteous arrangements of Christ's earthly kingdom, the remainder of Paul's words quoted earlier will come to pass for those who "come forth" from the tomb. Just as "in Adam" all have died, all "in Christ shall . . . be made alive," through heart obedience to the divine laws then in effect throughout the earth.—I Cor. 15:22

DEATH ALSO THE WAGES OF SIN

At this juncture, it is essential to note that although Satan was guilty of using the "murder weapons" of lies and deceit in the Garden of Eden, our first parents also bore responsibility. They sinned against the commandment that God had given them, which included his statement of what the penalty would be for disobedience—death. The Scriptures elsewhere are clear on this matter, stating, "The soul that sinneth, it shall die," and "the wages of sin is death."—Ezek. 18:4; Rom. 6:23

While all of Adam's posterity have fallen victim to death as a result of Satan's actions so long ago, they have also inherited the sinful nature to which our first parents fell as a result of disobedience. Here again, God's Word is plainly stated, as spoken by Paul in the Book of Romans: "There is none righteous, no, not one." "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." "By one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for . . . all have sinned."—Rom. 3:10,23; 5:12

The depths to which fallen man has entered into sin has varied greatly among individuals and groups throughout the ages. Many have, in fact, lived righteous lives to the extent of their ability to do so, but even these have not been perfect. We are reminded of two of God's faithful Old Testament servants, Moses and David, both of whom were used greatly to accomplish the Lord's purposes. Yet, the record of the Scriptures makes it clear that they made mistakes and were guilty of sin. In the New Testament, Peter and Paul were apostles of Christ and key instruments used to establish the Early Church. They too, however, were not perfect. Paul testified of his own sinful nature and the resulting struggle he engaged in daily, saying, "With the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin." (Rom. 7:25) Indeed, all of God's people down through the ages who have striven to live righteously have no doubt echoed the sentiments of Paul.

Others of mankind, however, have fallen deeper into sin, and in some cases, have taken on the characteristics which Satan himself possessed—

lying, deceit, and even a murderous heart. Such depth of sin which would result in man killing a fellow human being did not come about simply because he discovered an implement which could be used as a weapon, and then decided to use it to commit murder. Regardless of the physical implements used in such heinous acts—whether swords, knives, guns, bombs, or even bare hands—the greater weapons have been those sinful characteristics in the heart and the mind, which have somehow taken root and produced such evil acts.

CAIN—FIRST RECORDED MURDERER

An example of this circumstance is found in the experience of Cain and Abel, recorded in Genesis 4:1-15. This is the first recorded murder committed by man toward a fellow human being. Upon merely reading the Genesis account, it might appear that Cain killed his brother Abel in a sudden fit of rage due solely to God's acceptance of Abel's offering rather than his. In this rage, he perhaps found some implement close at hand, and almost without thinking committed the unthinkable act of murder.

We believe, however, there was much more going on in the mind and heart of Cain which led ultimately to his slaying of Abel. In the New Testament, the Apostle John discusses the vital importance of brotherly love among the followers of Christ. He states that the "children of God" and the "children of the devil" are manifest by their striving to do righteously and to love their brother, or by their failure to do so. (I John 3:10) In this context, John then cites Cain, saying that the children of God should be "not as Cain, who was of that wicked

one, and slew his brother. And wherefore slew he him? Because his own works were evil, and his brother's righteous."—vs. 12

We note the order of John's statements concerning Cain and Abel. He first says that Cain was "of that wicked one." Evidently, because of an increased measure of mental and heart depravity, over a period of time he had taken on some of the evil characteristics found in the Adversary. Then, John says, having already harbored these qualities and meditating more and more upon them, Cain "slew his brother."

The apostle summarizes by stating that Cain's "works were evil" while Abel's were "righteous." The "works" of Abel that God considered righteous did not consist merely of the offering he made of the "firstlings of his flock," nor did they begin with that act. (Gen. 4:4) The Apostle Paul indicates that it was "by faith," already established in the heart of Abel, that he "offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain," and by that exhibition of previously developed faith "he obtained witness that he was righteous." (Heb. 11:4) Indeed, Abel's acceptable offering prefigured the sacrifice of Jesus, which Paul says spoke of even "better things than that of Abel." (chap. 12:24) Yet, it was not just this one act which made Abel righteous in God's sight, but rather the heart of faith which he had developed over a period of time, and which he outwardly demonstrated by his offering.

Cain's "works were evil" in the same manner. The evil characteristics which gradually took root in his heart, and his apparent lack of faith in God, evidently caused him over time to lose love for his

brother. Quite possibly, he saw the contrasting qualities of faith and love evident in Abel's character, and the resulting blessings which seemed to come upon him. By and by, Cain's lack of love grew to envy and hatred, perhaps to the point where he was tempted by Satan to do harm to his brother. Finally, God's rejection of his offering and acceptance of Abel's provided the decisive motivation for Cain to act. God warned him that "sin lieth at the door." (Gen. 4:7) Yet, Cain's poisoned heart could not hold back, and he carried out the supreme act of hatred for his brother—murder.

Nothing is said concerning the weapon Cain used to carry out the slaying of Abel. This is because the lesson of key importance lay not with the outward implement used, but with the inward character developed. Thus it has been true down through the ages to our day. The outwardly visible tools of murder or other acts of violence have been of many kinds. However, the overriding cause of such acts traces itself to the evil nature which Satan first exhibited, and then by man's disobedience, to the more or less sinful character attributes which have passed down from one generation to the next.

HUMAN VENGEANCE NOT AUTHORIZED

After slaying Abel, God said to Cain, "thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground. And now art thou cursed . . . ; a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth." (Gen. 4:10-12) Cain replied, saying that this punishment was more than he could bear, and "every one that findeth me shall slay me." (vss. 13,14) Then God made an interesting, but important, statement. "The LORD

said unto him, Therefore whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. And the LORD set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him.—vs. 15

God set forth a great truth with these words. Cain had committed murder, and was to receive punishment according to the righteous will of God. However, it was not up to anyone of mankind to avenge the killing of Abel by slaying Cain. To further emphasize this important lesson, God said that anyone who might thus slay Cain would receive seven times the punishment he had been given. He even “set a mark” on Cain which gave indication to all who would see him that it was a gross violation of God’s law to seek vengeance against him.

This principle is set forth throughout the Scriptures. Referring to the Old Testament, Paul said, “We know him that hath said, Vengeance belongeth unto me, I will recompense, saith the Lord.” (Heb. 10:30; Deut. 32:35) The Apostle also emphasized this same point to the followers of Christ, saying, “Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves: . . . for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.”—Rom. 12:19

GOD’S VENGEANCE LEADS TO RECOVERY

From the foregoing consideration, it is clear that God’s recovery plan for mankind, previously spoken of in our lesson, must include provisions in addition to the benefits which will accrue to man from the ransom, rising from the dead, and being rid of Satan’s evil influence. These are all vital elements of man’s restoration, but a further key is

the necessity for man's heart and character to be changed from its present sinful nature and resulting propensities to righteousness—that which Adam possessed before he disobeyed, plunging himself and all his progeny into sin and death.

This feature of man's recovery will also take place during the period of Christ's kingdom. Upon receiving the benefits of the ransom, and being raised from the sleep of death, a great education process will begin. This program will be for a two-fold purpose—first, to remove forever the sinful, even murderous, traits of character which have plagued fallen man throughout his existence; and second, to put in their place the righteous character elements encapsulated in the godlike quality of love.

This being God's purpose, his "vengeance" is not to be for mankind's destruction or eternal suffering, but to teach and guide them toward loving harmony with one another, and with their Creator, in whose "image" they were originally made. (Gen. 1:26,27) As part of the kingdom arrangements, God will establish a "New Covenant" in the earth with mankind. Under this arrangement he states, "I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall teach no more . . . saying, Know the LORD: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the LORD." God will then "forgive their iniquity, and . . . remember their sin no more."—Jer. 31:31-34

ISAIAH'S TESTIMONY

In Isaiah chapter 59, the prophet provides a beautiful glimpse of God's plan for man, correlating

the need for a measure of vengeance with its intended purpose of bringing man back into his favor. Paraphrasing in part, Isaiah first says that God “saw that there was no man” who could provide for man’s redemption. However, his only begotten Son—“his arm”—came to earth as man’s Redeemer and “brought salvation.” Continuing the prophecy, Isaiah states that God “put on the garments of vengeance, . . . According to their deeds, accordingly he will repay, . . . he will repay recompence.”—vss. 16-18

The prophet then turns his focus to God’s ultimate purpose, saying in the very next verse that the same ones who have received the needed measure of recompence “shall . . . fear [reverence] the name of the LORD from the west, and his glory from the rising of the sun.” Concerning Satan—“the enemy, . . . the Spirit of the LORD shall lift up a standard against him [*Strong’s Concordance*: make to flee away]. And the Redeemer shall come to Zion, and unto them that turn from transgression in Jacob, saith the LORD.” Both the footstep followers of Christ of the present Gospel Age—heavenly Zion—and all the remainder of mankind—symbolized here as Jacob—who “turn from” sin in the coming earthly kingdom, will receive the full benefits provided by the “Redeemer.”—vss. 19,20

Isaiah’s prophecy concludes with God’s words of assurance that these things will surely come to pass. “As for me, this is my covenant with them, saith the LORD; My spirit that is upon thee, and my words which I have put in thy mouth, shall not depart out of thy mouth, nor out of the mouth of thy seed, nor out of the mouth of thy seed’s seed,

saith the LORD, from henceforth and for ever.” (Isa. 59:21) As stated by God through the prophet in another place, “My word . . . that goeth forth out of my mouth . . . shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.”—Isa. 55:11

Let us then rejoice as we look forward to the time when swords, spears, guns, and bombs, will all be forever put away—beaten “into plowshares . . . and pruninghooks” (Mic. 4:3) May we also delight in the prospect of having the character “weapons” of lies, deceit, hatred, and malice, found in fallen man, replaced with the holy qualities of kindness, gentleness, peace, and love. (Gal. 5:22) Indeed, God will fulfill his promise to mankind that, whether from guns or hatred, “Violence shall no more be heard in thy land.”—Isa. 60:18 ■