



# BRIDGES FOR PEACE

## *Israel Teaching Letter*

Vol. # 771209

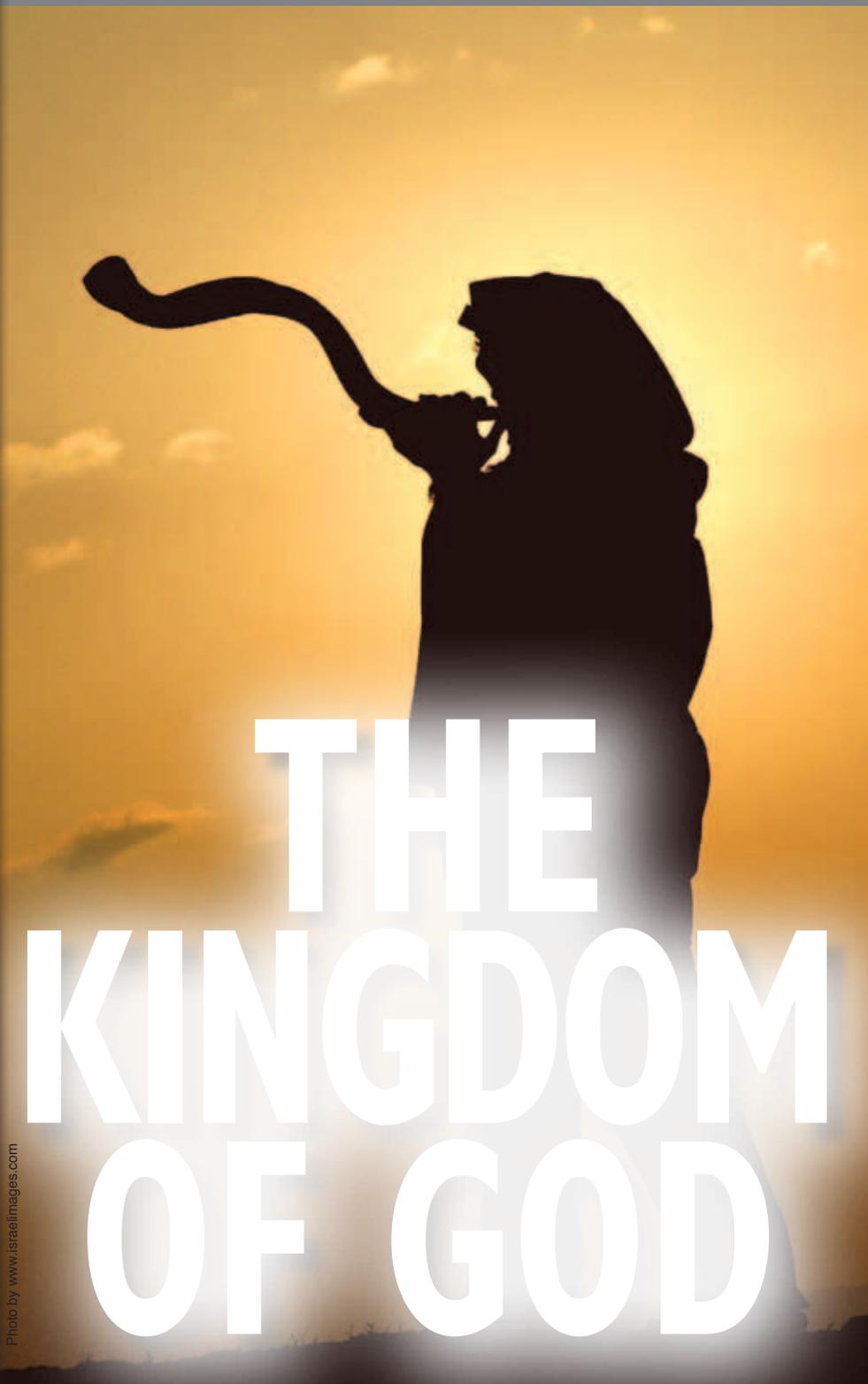
December 2009

Bridges for Peace  
Your Israel Connection ®

- International Headquarters  
P.O. Box 1093  
Jerusalem, Israel  
Tel: (972) 2-624-5004  
intl.office@bridgesforpeace.com
- Australia  
P.O. Box 1785, Buderim  
Queensland 4556  
Tel: 07-5453-7988  
adminaust@bridgesforpeace.com.au
- Canada  
P.O. Box 21001, RPO Charleswood  
Winnipeg, MB R3R 3R2  
Tel: 204-489-3697, bfp@mts.net
- Japan  
Taihei Sakura Bldg. 5F  
4-13-2 Taihei, Sumida-Ku  
Tokyo 130 0012  
Tel: 03-5637-5333, bfp@bfpj.net
- New Zealand  
P.O. Box 10142  
Te Mai, Whangarei  
Tel: 09-434-6527  
bfpnz@paradise.net.nz
- South Africa  
P.O. Box 1848  
Durbanville 7551  
Tel: 021-975-1941  
info@bridgesforpeace.co.za
- United Kingdom  
11 Bethania Street, Maesteg  
Bridgend, Wales CF34 9DJ  
Tel: 01656-739494  
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- United States  
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# THE KINGDOM OF GOD

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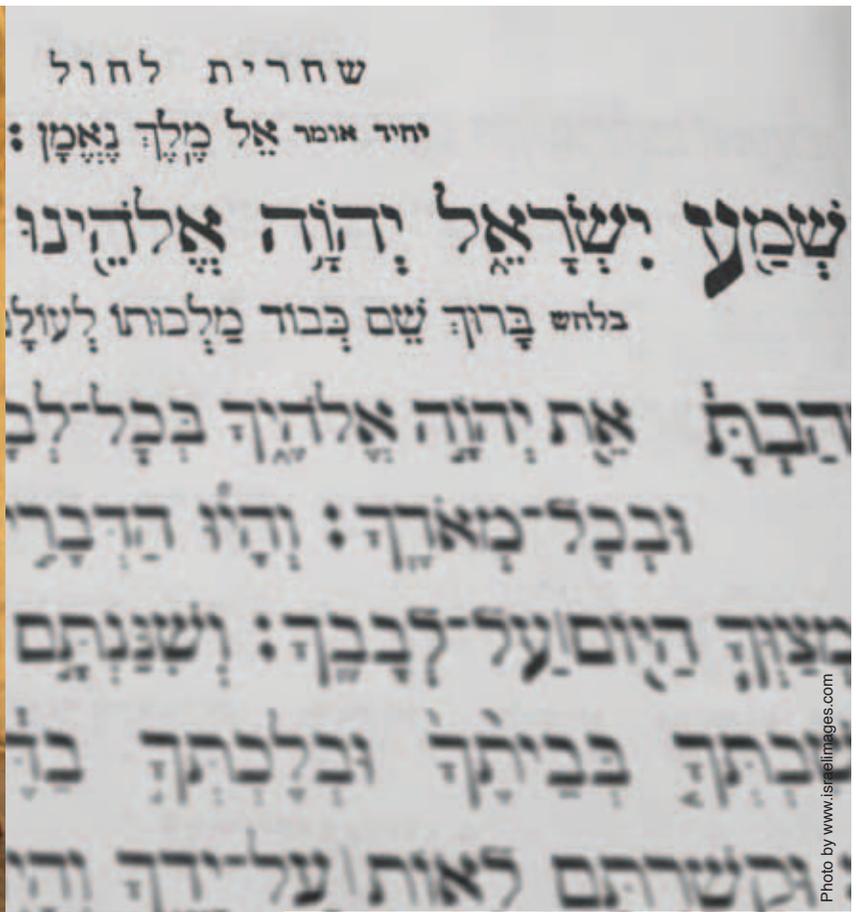
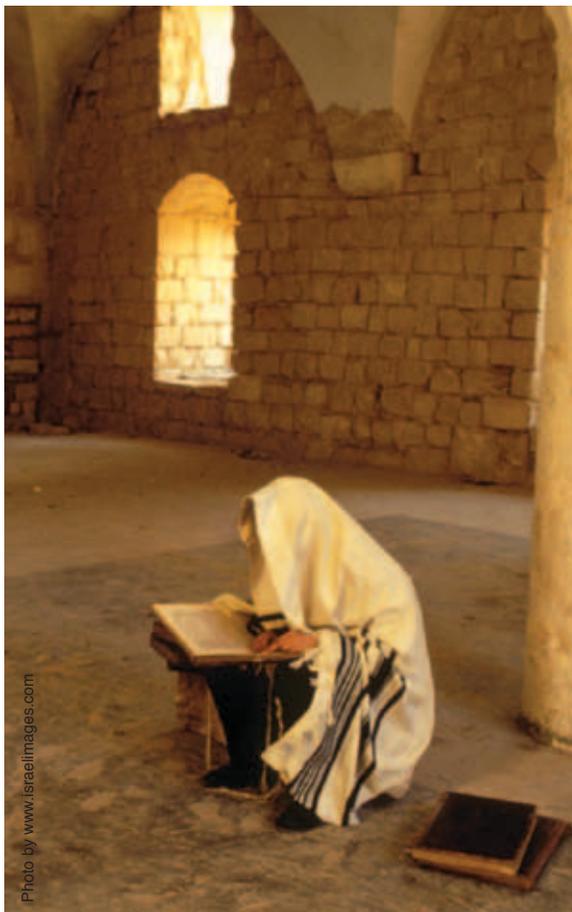


HOW CLOSELY  
DOES A JEWISH  
DEFINITION FIT  
WITH THE  
CHRISTIAN  
UNDERSTANDING  
OF THE  
KINGDOM  
OF GOD ?

Today, Christian congregations sing songs about “preparing the way.” But are we clear about what we are preparing the way for and how we are to do it? John the Baptist, who appears in the New Testament to prepare the way for Yeshua (Jesus), is a fitting place to start in answering those questions. John’s message, as well as Yeshua’s, was “*Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*” (Matt. 3:2, 4:17). The kingdom of heaven was what they were preparing the people for. What exactly is the kingdom of heaven? If John prepared for it and Yeshua established it, what are we preparing for?

In both Christianity and Judaism, the “kingdom of God” or the “kingdom of heaven” is a Messianic term, referring to a kingdom that the Messiah will establish. Though some see distinctions in the two phrases, most view them as synonymous. In Hebrew, it is *malchut shamayyim*. In *A Concise Companion to the Jewish Religion*, a Jewish reference book that defines Jewish terms, the definition reads: “It is the rabbinic expression for the sovereignty of God as acknowledged by human beings. It is broken down into three aspects: (1) An individual accepts the yoke of the kingdom of heaven when he recites the *Shema* or Deut. 6:4, ‘*Hear O Israel the Lord our God, the Lord is one.*’ (2) Universally, it is the kingdom that Messiah will establish over all peoples. (3) Nationalistically, it is when the people of Israel will be redeemed from a subservience to earthly rulers.”

How closely does this Jewish definition fit with a Christian understanding? The “kingdom of God” was central to Yeshua’s teaching, so it is important that Christians grasp what it is. Many Christian scholars have dedicated years to the study of the kingdom and countless books have been written about it. So, an eight-page teaching letter cannot do it justice, but hopefully, it will provide a good beginning and jump-start a desire to pursue further personal study. To understand how the term was used in John’s day, it’s good to have a clear picture of the spiritual and political climate of his day.



The large print on the third line is the *Shema* (Deut.6:4) in Hebrew.

## The Spiritual Climate of John's Day

When John the Baptist came on the scene, his voice and message were like the blowing of a trumpet or *shofar*. Let me explain. *Rosh HaShanah* ("head of the year"), or the Jewish New Year, is the first of the fall (autumn) biblical feasts. In Leviticus 23, where all seven of the Lord's feasts are listed, *Rosh HaShanah* has the least instruction of all. You blow trumpets. No explanation is given as to why. However, the following feast, just 10 days later, is *Yom Kippur* (Day of Atonement), the most solemn day of the year when Jewish people fast, acknowledge their sin, and come before the Lord for forgiveness. Implied by the close connection of the two holy days, and as taught by the Jewish sages, is that the blowing of trumpets on *Rosh HaShanah* acts as a wake-up call: *Yom Kippur* is coming!

The "trumpet" most often used in biblical times was the simple *shofar* or ram's horn, though they also used silver trumpets in tabernacle and Temple times. When the trumpet or *shofar* was blown, it was a call to listen up or to gather together; it was a way of getting the people's attention—no megaphones, amplifiers, sirens, or fancy electrical contraptions then. But, believe me, when a *shofar* is blown, you can't miss it! *Rosh HaShanah* was God's call to get the heart right, to repent, so God could forgive them on *Yom Kippur*.

John's prophetic voice was heard as clearly as a *shofar's* blowing. It startled those who heard it, and people flocked to hear him. John message, in effect, was more than repentance. It was a wake-up call. He believed that everything the prophets of old prophesied about Messiah was about to come true. "It's time to be aware of what God is doing!" John told his listeners. "The kingdom of heaven is close at hand! Get your heart ready, repent, for the One Who Forgives is coming."





Senatus Populusque Romanus (SPQR)  
("The Senate and People of Rome")



Herod the Great

## The Political Climate of John's Day

In a previous teaching letter, "Messiah," by Rebecca Brimmer, she writes: "Yeshua lived as an Orthodox Jewish man in first-century Israel at an extremely turbulent time. The Jewish people were in bondage to cruel oppressive Roman overlords. They felt the need for the Messiah to deliver them. There was great Messianic expectation. Jewish author Gershom Gorenberg describes it this way: 'Jesus appeared during those centuries of ferment. Christianity was the daughter not simply of Judaism but of a Judaism burning with expectation, standing on tiptoes and ready to leap into the End.'"

In their *AD Chronicles* fiction series, Bodie and Brock Thoene take readers back to the very beginning of the first century when Yeshua was born and describe how frightful a time it was for the people of that day, particularly for the righteous and God-fearing. Living under the cruel dominion of the Roman Empire, the need for the promised Messiah was never greater. Criticisms of the government had to be whispered behind doors.

King Herod, not Jewish, was a madman who suspected everyone of sedition and would kill even his own family members at the slightest hint of disloyalty. Though there were religious leaders who recognized that the time of the prophesied Messiah was close, they discussed these matters in secret for fear of the corrupt priesthood who was loyal to Rome. Herod was paranoid over any talk of a "messiah" king that might depose him. Those who spoke of it publicly were carefully watched and reported on by Herod's spies, even within the Temple's outer courtyard. For those who suffered, the hope for the Messiah was their daily prayer and was spoken of often in muffled conversation.

This explains the various responses to the "kingdom of heaven" message of John and Yeshua—why many of the priesthood and religious leaders were offended by it and why the suffering populace flocked by the thousands to hear about it. However, the term "kingdom of heaven" is not found in the Old Testament. Did John and Yeshua "coin" that term?

## An Old Testament Concept

Joseph Frankovic, a Christian biblical scholar who studied in Jerusalem for many years, published a lesson on the kingdom of heaven. He explains that the only place the term is found is in the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) and rabbinic literature. He reasons that Yeshua most likely would not have "invented a technical term" that His audience was not familiar with. More likely, He would have used something common to their understanding and "tailored it for His purposes."

He writes that if you were to "ask a Hebrew-speaking rabbi where the Kingdom of Heaven first appeared in history," he would point you to Exodus 15:18: "*The LORD shall reign forever and ever.*" This is the last line of the song the children of Israel sang after the Red Sea swallowed up Pharaoh's army. Here, they experienced the sovereign God in control or God as king. But it wasn't that they had never known God as sovereign, the master of the universe; the difference was that, for the first time, they were acknowledging Him as king over their *lives*, not just over the universe. This verse can be translated: "*The LORD is reigning forever and ever.*" He was reigning in their present reality.

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A similar passage to Exodus 15:18 is Zechariah 14:9: “*And the Lord shall be king over all the earth; in that day shall the Lord be One and His name one.*” The later part of this verse is the *Shema*: “*The LORD our God, the LORD is one,*” and here it is tied to Messiah’s rule as king. As cited previously in the Jewish definition of the kingdom of heaven, each Jewish person accepts the yoke of the kingdom of heaven through the reciting of the *Shema*. For Christians, we say the same thing when we pray, “*Your Kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven*” (Matt. 6:10). God is not only one, but is THE One who reigns over all the earth. I was taught long ago to pray, “... Your will be done in *me*, as it is in heaven.” It puts the right emphasis on the true meaning of the kingdom. God wants to rule over the kingdom in our hearts, and the people of Old Testament times understood that.

So, though the phrase, “kingdom of heaven (God)” is not used in the Old Testament specifically, in principle, it is. And by Yeshua’s time, it was a well-known term. Though Yeshua may have described it a little differently than the rabbis of that day, He did not invent it. Now let’s look at some modern-day misconceptions of what the kingdom of heaven is.

## *It Is Not Eternal Life*

Some Christians might think of eternal life as the kingdom of heaven, but in Jewish thought this is not so. Remember, we are not studying this to point out differences between Judaism and Christianity. We are studying how the Jewish people of Bible times understood this (and still do), so we can adjust our definitions to the Hebraic understanding of them. When the Jewish people thought of the kingdom, they were not thinking about life hereafter. They have a different expression for eternal life: *olam habah* (the world to come), which refers to the immortality of the soul and life after death. *Olam habah* is the reward for those who have taken on the yoke of the kingdom of heaven.

Frankovic points out that equating eternal life with the kingdom of God started with a misunderstanding of the use of these terms as the Gospel writers used them. Whereas Mark uses “kingdom of heaven” 15 times, and Matthew and Luke use it over 30 times, John uses it only twice, but uses eternal life 10 times. This has caused Christian theologians from early in Church history to view them as the same. He writes: “The kingdom of heaven is about redemption. It is God’s redemptive power impacting humanity. It is a concept that remains anchored in the present with future implications. So, while it has future implications, it is about God’s present redemptive work in individual lives on the earth presently.”

## *It Is Not the Second Coming*

The Church at large has also equated the Second Coming of Yeshua with the kingdom of God. While the New Testament may teach that the kingdom of God climaxes with the Second Coming, the kingdom itself is more about the process of God’s redemptive work on earth in the present. Among other differences, Frankovic points out that the kingdom parables of the mustard seed (Matt. 13:31) and the leaven (v. 33) depict a gradually expanding kingdom, while the Second Coming is a sudden event. Frankovic quotes from a Catholic source that he feels hits the mark about the kingdom of God: “It exists whenever God’s will is at work...When we pray ‘thy kingdom come,’ we are hoping also for the in-breaking of God’s power—right now in our daily lives.” Though Yeshua taught about the end times, He taught mostly about how to live out the kingdom-life daily.

Frankovic likens Yeshua’s kingdom concept to the Jewish concept of *tikun ha-olam*, which literally means “mending the world.” In essence, this is what Yeshua did. Though He didn’t completely “mend the world” as the Jewish people expected of the Messiah, He described His ministry as found in Isaiah 61:1–3: preaching the good news and healing the sick in heart, mind, and body. This was, in fact, what a king was expected to do for his people. Marvin Wilson, a leading scholar on Christian-Jewish relationships and professor of biblical and theological studies,



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explains in his book *Our Father Abraham*: "It was customary for the monarch to bring salvation to his people by meeting their practical needs of relief, care, and protection."

This is reflected in the whole of Psalm 72, a Messianic psalm, which describes a just king, who brings peace to his people. "He will deliver the needy when he cries, the poor also, and him who has no helper. He will spare the poor and needy, and will save the souls of the needy. He will redeem their life from oppression and violence; and precious shall be their blood in His sight" (vv. 12–14). Wilson explains the Christian belief that Yeshua "came to this earth on a rescue mission." And, anyone who follows this King partners with God in making the world a better place by feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and visiting the sick and imprisoned (Matt. 25:34-46). This is kingdom-living on earth in the present.



## *It Is the Reign of the Will of God*

*"TO PRAY FOR  
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GOD."*

As we began this teaching, I gave a Jewish definition of kingdom of heaven, seen in three parts: for the individual, for the whole world, and for Israel. Christian commentator William Barclay teaches that Yeshua also saw it three different ways: past, future, and present. First, the kingdom as it existed in the past, when Yeshua describes Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and all the prophets as part of the kingdom of heaven: "There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and yourselves thrust out" (Luke 13:28). However, in the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9–13), He says "Your kingdom come," which speaks of the future, but then "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" speaking of the present.

He concludes: "Any man who at any time in history perfectly did God's will was within the Kingdom; but since the world is very far from being a place where God's will is perfectly and universally done, the consummation of the Kingdom is still in the future and is still something for which we must pray...To pray for the Kingdom of Heaven is to pray that we may submit our wills entirely to the will of God." So, in short, it is basically the same as the Jewish definition I started with: "the sovereignty of God as acknowledged by human beings." For Christians, this is based on a recognition of Yeshua as Messiah.

An incident in Mark 12:28–34 describes how Yeshua expects the kingdom to be lived out on an everyday basis. A scribe asks Yeshua, "Which is the first commandment of all?" Yeshua answers to love God and "love your neighbor as yourself." The scribe agrees and says that these two commandments are "more than all the whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." Yeshua's last remarks to the scribe were, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."



The "Chosen Preparer of the Way for the Mahdi"?

## *How to Prepare*

The Messiah is coming! Many Jewish people know it and are "mending the world" through righteous deeds to make it the best possible place for His arrival. Muslims are also looking for a messiah; they call him the *Madhi*, and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad sees himself as the chosen preparer of the way for him. His aims for worldwide Islamic domination are propelled by his strong belief that the *Madhi's* coming is imminent, and all his political maneuvering is simply setting the stage for his arrival. Christians know the Messiah as Yeshua, but how are we preparing for His coming?

According to the Thoenes' story, in Roman times, when a king came through town, a trumpet was sounded to call the populace along the roadside to cheer the passing king, even if he was a contemptible one. Barclay tells how the roads

were prepared ahead of time for a king's journey. Most roads were just narrow, hard-packed pathways; they were not surfaced and made smooth for easy travel. A saying of that time was "There are three states of misery—sickness, fasting, and travel." However, the King's Highway was an exception. King Solomon had such a road made of black basalt stone. (There was even such a roadway in Moses' time. See Numbers 20:17.) Before the king would make a journey, the communities along the way were notified, so the roads would be repaired and made ready for the king's passage.

The Hebrew word for "highway" is *mesillah*. Its root word is *salal*, which means to exalt or raise up. A highway was a raised-up road way that made travel easy. When we build spiritual "highways," we make the way easy for God to fulfill His will on the earth. Scripture tells us ways we can prepare such "highways" today:

### 1. *By loving the Jewish people*

The Jewish people have been very cruelly treated throughout the centuries, much of that treatment at the hands of those who called themselves Christians. For many, this has caused feelings of pain, betrayal, and even abandonment. For some, the wounds are so deep that they feel abandoned not only by man, but by God as well. When Bridges for Peace is able to express unconditional love to the Jewish people by giving them the gifts that Christian donors provide, their hearts are deeply touched at the realization that they are not alone, that there are Christians around the world who love them because God loves them.

### 2. *By reminding God of His promises*

When Daniel was in Babylon, he came across Jeremiah's prophecy that the Babylonian captivity would last 70 years. When he realized the 70 years were finished, he prayed, reminding God of His prophetic promise (chapter 9), and it soon came to pass. God wants us to do the same today with the prophetic promises in Scripture that are yet to be fulfilled.

There is a special highway spoken of in Isaiah 19. The prophet foresees that a day will come when there will be a spiritual connection (highway) among the peoples of Assyria (approximately the area of Syria and Iraq today), Israel, and Egypt. They will all worship the Lord together! It's a picture of what the kingdom of God will look like when it fully comes to earth. In light of today's politics, it is hard to believe such a thing could be possible. Yet, several Christian groups have begun to pray over (and in) these countries. By reminding the Lord of His Word, they are preparing this highway for the Lord.

### 3. *By bringing the Jewish people home*

Isaiah 49 is a Messianic chapter, describing Messiah's mission. Part of His work is to bring His people back home to Israel. "For He who has mercy on them will lead them, even by the springs of water He will guide them. I will make each of My mountains a road, and My highways shall be elevated. Surely these shall come from afar; look! Those from the north and the west..." (vv. 10b–12). When we invest in helping bring the Jewish people home (as we do through BFP's Project Rescue), we become partners with God's mission. When we provide funds to help in this endeavor, we are making the rough places smooth and building a highway for their return.

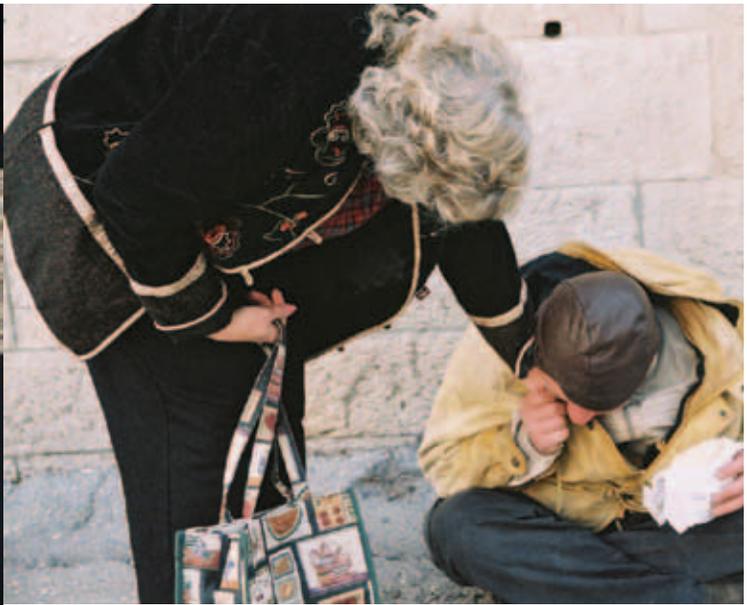
### 4. *By hoping for Messiah's return*

Both Jews and Christians are expecting the Messiah's arrival soon. As Christians, we believe that Messiah will be Yeshua, and in the Christian Scriptures, the



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Apostle John says that even the “hope” of Yeshua’s return has a purifying effect in us. “...but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure” (1 John 3:3).

### 5. By letting God reign as Lord in our hearts

Preparation for the kingdom of God is no different today than it was in John the Baptist’s day, or even the days of the Old Testament, for that matter. It is the preparation of the heart. In many things, when we prepare for something, such as for a trip, we do it and it is done, but preparation of the heart is an ongoing process. Oswald Chambers, author of *My*

*Utmost for His Highest*, explains: “It is easy to imagine that we will get to a place where we are complete and ready, but preparation is not suddenly accomplished; it is a process steadily maintained.” We may think we have given the Lord all, but check again. Chambers says: “You were looking for a great thing to give up. God is telling you of some tiny thing; but at the back of it, there lies the central citadel of obstinacy. I will not give up my right to myself.”

The kingdom of God is established whenever and wherever God’s will has been allowed to reign without objection, even in the smallest place—and that is how the world is mended, one heart at a time.

By Charleeda Sprinkle, Assistant Editor

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All Scripture is taken from the New King James Version, unless otherwise noted.

**M**any pastors, Bible teachers, and lay people have written and asked if they can use these notes for preaching and teaching. The answer is a resounding “yes”! It is our hope that the information contained herein will be disseminated over and over again, whether through the spoken word or by photocopying and redistributing these teachings. “For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem” (Isaiah 2:3).

