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"He delights in mercy" (Micah 7:18)

Jonestown Revisited

by Steve Higginbotham

It happened on Saturday, November 18, 1978. A total of 918 members of the People's Temple Church in Jonestown, Guyana committed suicide/murder. Of this number, 294 of the dead were children under the age of 18.

I was 16 years old at the time. I remember spending time talking about the events in my 10th Grade World Culture class. Though 20 years have passed, I still vividly see in my mind the pictures of hundreds of people lying dead on the ground; arms wrapped around one another, mother's holding their babies, and a father embracing what must have been his wife and children.

The question that people asked then, and continue to ask today is, "How could so many people do such a senseless thing? How could so many people forfeit their lives, and the lives of their children?" While I still find these questions hard to answer, I do believe I have a better understanding of it today, than I did 20 years ago.

I believe the answer can be found in a comment made by the Major in charge of the Army operation to remove the bodies from Jonestown. In disbelief, he said, "There were no Bibles in Jonestown!" These people had been weaned away from the word of God, and had learned to trust in the words of a man.

Can such a tragedy happen again? Of course it can. It happens every day. Not the mass suicides, but people who turn from the Word of God to follow the words of a man. Loyalty to God's Word can save us from the tragedy of following a man to our own physical and eternal destruction. "Where there is no vision [revelation - S.H.], the people perish..." (Proverbs 29:18).