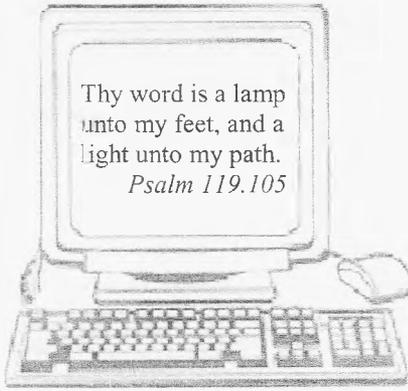
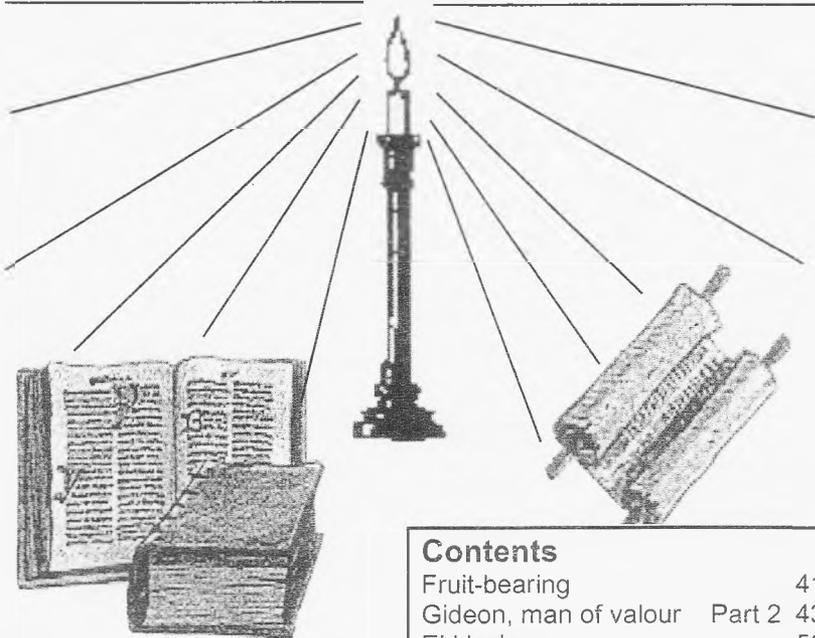


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BIBLE STUDY MONTHLY

FOUNDED 1924

The Bible Study Monthly is published to promote knowledge of the Bible. It sees the Scriptures as a true record of God's dealings with the human race, needing to be understood in our generation. It looks for the advent of our Lord, and His reign of peace and justice on the earth.

"Speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into Him who is the head, into Christ" (Ephesians 4:15 NRSV)

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FRUIT-BEARING

I am the vine and you are the branches. Whoever remains in me, and I in him, will bear much fruit; for you can do nothing without me. John 15.5
GNB

If we are united to Christ we bear fruit - that is one of the greatest things that being a disciple means. It was in his last words to the eleven, when he was about to be parted from them, that Jesus said it: separated from me you can do, not just a very little, but nothing. He had been explaining that to be united to him in his physical absence means obedience, and an enormous love.

Bearing fruit is his purpose for the church, and what he expects of each one of us, it is the reason we are connected to him. This does work for our own benefit too - what could be better than to love obey and enjoy Christ, enjoy the Father, above anything else and for ever. But at heart it is not a selfish union, it means doing what will make people praise God, and enduring for God's sake, and being that sort of person.

Christ lives in us by his Spirit, and that is how we bear fruit, which is the essential purpose of our life. There is no part of our life to which this does not apply. We are in the wrong place altogether if we think we live so much as a quarter of an hour to ourselves. Every moment we are Christ's hands and feet, his tools, his slaves. True, in daily life we do things and play a part which does not seem to have any connection with him. But to be true to him, we should be living as ones who belong to him whatever else is

happening in us or around us. Whether we are working or resting, laughing or doing serious Christian service, on our own or talking to others, He still belongs to us. And we belong to him. If we are aware of this, it will result in fruit bearing. We shall not feel awkward about it, we shall just come to relax in doing and being what pleases him. And Christ will shine out of our lives in every thought and action.

Another picture in scripture of being joined to Christ is marriage. Paul uses the analogy that the old relationship with God based on keeping his laws is cancelled by the death of Christ for us. Now we belong to 'Another, the One who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God' (Romans 7.4) - the GNB puts it, 'be useful in the service of God'. No longer is our life a matter of obeying rules, we serve in the new way of the Spirit. Union with Christ reveals itself in a life of true holiness, so that is the basis we must act on, in restful strength, confident in his power. His power. Yet we need to be watchful of our lives, and be conscious of His strength that we are drawing on.

The fruit we bear is the fruit of the Spirit. All its facets blend together - not love and joy here, faithfulness there, meekness and self-control somewhere else, but one character of many sides, such as is described in the Beatitudes. It is the Spirit that makes real our union with Christ. Christ is like the sun with its warmth and glory, the Spirit is like the air around us through which it shines. Or putting it another way, Christ is the fountain of spiritual life, the Spirit the channel by which life reaches us.

Scripture speaks of being absolutely filled with the fruit of righteousness. It is like an apple orchard where all the fruit has ripened to maturity and all the trees are loaded, 'pushing out golden apples wherever there is wood to carry them'. This means we seek the full experience of the Spirit, not necessarily in ecstasies of emotion. The true secret of the matter is our calm, deliberate, submissive welcome of the Holy One in, for Christ's will to be done in every part of our being, in every circumstance, at every time. We make it our considered decision to be, every moment, everything that He is able to make us. To be filled in every part and through all our lives with everything that he can put into us.

'Tis thine to cleanse the heart,
To satisfy the soul,
To pour fresh life on every part
And new create the whole.

This article is based on the work of HCG Moule, Thoughts on Union with Christ 1887.

GIDEON MAN OF VALOUR

2 The Sword of the Lord

“Arise, get thee down unto the house; for I have delivered it into thine hand.”

The stirring command was Gideon's signal to act. From the peaceful life of a country farmer he had emerged, by appointment of the Lord, as the military leader of thirty thousand men eager to deliver their homeland from the invading Midianites. But the Lord had reduced his army to a mere three hundred, telling him that these would be enough to achieve the victory he planned. Now this small force was gathered on the northern slopes of Mount Gilboa overlooking the valley where the enemy was encamped. The nature of his instructions was unusual and the manner in which he was to launch the attack would seem laughable if judged by normal standards of warfare, but this was the Lord's war and Gideon knew his God well enough to be persuaded that his way was right. The Lord had told him that the victory was as good as accomplished and now gave him the word to advance, and, as it were, left the whole issue in his hands.

There was no hesitation; Gideon went immediately into action. He might well have pleaded that his men needed a night's rest before engaging the enemy. They had started out early in the morning (Jud. 7.1) after their journey to the site of the coming battle and spent the rest of the day eliminating the unwilling and the unready and now it was night (ch. 7.9), probably soon after six o'clock, which is the approximate time of darkness in Israel. The attack took place between ten and eleven the same night (ch. 7.19) and there was much to be done before that. First of all Gideon with his attendant Phurah made a personal reconnaissance of the enemy camp. Overhearing a Midianite recounting his dream and his fellow interpreting it to signify Midianite's defeat at the hands of Israel, Gideon rightly deduced that the host was at least in a state of apprehension. He could go back to his men elated and summon them to attack; he did not do so at once. First of all, we are told “he worshipped – and returned to the host of Israel”. In the midst of the enemy, in imminent danger of detection and capture, he nevertheless found time to pause and render thanks to God and doubtless supplication for continued guidance and support. Only then did he make his way back to his own followers and safety.

Now Gideon prepared for battle. The Lord had given him three hundred men with assurance that no more were needed; even though the Lord had guaranteed victory it still devolved upon Gideon to make the best possible use of his three hundred men. Whether the subsequent course of action was

suggested to him by inspiration of the Holy Spirit and so God-given, or was the outcome of his own strategic ingenuity, we do not know, but probably the former. The account says that he divided his forces into three companies of a hundred men each and provided each individual with a trumpet, a torch and an empty pitcher. Where he obtained three hundred pitchers and trumpets at such short notice does not readily appear, but remembering that he had lately dismissed nearly thirty thousand men who had come from fairly distant parts of the country prepared for a possibly lengthy campaign it may well be that plenty were available in the general camp impedita. What is more important is the fact that no provision seems to have been made for weapons. Certain it is that with a trumpet in one hand, a pitcher in the other, and a torch held somehow, there was not much manoeuvring space for a sword. It is evident that the initial attack, at least, devised to put the enemy to flight, was going to be launched without the assistance of the traditional weapons of war and in fact it was this completely different and unexpected technique which accomplished the desired end. There is something here which was echoed in the confident words of the boy David when he faced the giant Philistine Goliath. "Thou comest to me with a sword and with a spear, and with a shield; but I come to thee in the name of the Lord of Hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom thou has defied."

A hasty instruction to the warriors and the three companies were dispatched to their positions. One party of a hundred men was to station itself on the slopes of Mount Moreh to the north of the enemy camp, one on the slopes of Mount Gilboa to the south, and one across the head of the valley to the west. The torches were to be concealed in the pitchers so that no light showed. The Midianites lay in the valley, but they were surrounded on three sides by a handful of men probably well spaced out. The only avenue of escape was to the east, towards Jordan. The narrative itself does not give these geographical details; it tells only of the three companies and that, when stationed according to Gideon's instructions. "they stood every man in his place about the camp", but it only needs a glance at a large scale map of the district to see that this clearly was the plan of campaign. So, by ten o'clock, "the beginning of the middle watch" (ch. 7.19) all was ready. (Unlike the system in Roman times, ancient Israel had three "watches" in the night, six to ten, ten to two, two to six). The first shift of sentries had gone off duty, doubtless reporting to their successors "a fine night and all's well", oblivious of the silent watchers on the hillsides, and the second shift began to make themselves as comfortable as they could, shrouding themselves in their long robes from the night cold and hoping for a swift passing of the next four hours. And Gideon, at the head of his own party – it has been remarked in our own times that Israeli officers in action are always in front of their men and never

behind – moved silently towards the outskirts of the Midianite camp “when they had but newly set the (middle) watch”. . . .

“The sword of the Lord and Gideon!” the stentorian cry rang out loud and clear in the quietness of the night. In a moment, as the dazed sentries sprang up, the cry was echoed and re-echoed from every side. As the awakened Midianites tumbled out of their tents and began feverishly to collect accoutrements and weapons there came what sounded like the clashing of the arms of a mighty host. Looking up they perceived a myriad points of light on the hillside around the camp. Gideon's men, following instructions, had dashed their pitchers on the rocks and revealed their torches, at the same time sounding their trumpets and shouting their battle cry. In the same dense darkness the twinkling lights, the noise of splintering earthenware and strident blast of trumpets, the shouting of men, must have seemed to the Midianites as though a vast avenging host was converging upon them from all directions, save one. Only toward the east were there no shouts, no trumpets, no lights. And so the entire host, in sudden panic, fled in utter and indescribable confusion that way in an instinctive bid to escape. The River Jordan was only twelve miles away and an easy ford existed there. Once across Jordan they could be measurably safe and on the way to their own land. So they ran, in the darkness of the night, ran as they had never run before, leaving behind them all their property, their tents and possessions, their camels and asses and beasts of burden on which they had expected to carry home the spoils of the raid on Israel's land. Now all these things were left behind to be a spoil for Israel. So they pressed on, looking back from time to time only to see those flickering torches and hear those piercing trumpets as the three hundreds pursued them through the valley.

It would seem from Ch. 7.22 that in the confusion and the dense darkness the Midianites and Amelekites mistook each other for pursuers and began to fight among themselves, added to which the thousands of Israelites who had been rejected by Gideon at the waters of Harod now joined in the pursuit and assisted in the discomfiture of the fugitives. It is here that a rather strange factor is introduced. According to ch. 7.22 the fleeing hosts most unaccountably turned aside from the direct route across Jordan and made their way towards Abelmeholah, on the Israeli side of Jordan and some twenty miles to the south, thus placing themselves at the mercy of the pursuers. Why they thus failed to cross the river into relative safety at the easiest point is incomprehensible save for one element in the story. Ch. 7.24 says that Gideon sent messengers to the tribe of Ephraim upon the mountains, bidding them come down and hold the fords of Jordan at Beth-barah, the crossing point in question. The narrative reads as if Gideon sent this message after the attack and whilst the flight was in progress, but another glance at the map shows the

unlikelihood of this. Long before the messengers could have climbed the twenty miles to the fords, the host would have cleared the dozen miles which lay between them and safety. The probable conclusion is that Gideon had sent his messengers before he attacked the Midianites and the men of Ephraim were already in position when the fight began. The tenses in Hebrew are not so exact as in English and the preterite form which speaks of past time does not always indicate clearly the relation of two past events to each other in a narrative. In this case vs. 24 probably is better rendered in English "and Gideon *had* sent messengers", i.e. before he advanced to the attack. In consequence the fleeing Midianites found their channel of escape across the Jordan blocked by another force of armed men and so were compelled to turn southward in their search for a way out. They had now roused all Israel against them and were more or less surrounded. Out of that hundred and thirty-five thousand fugitives only fifteen thousand succeeded in getting across the river. The remainder were slain by the now thoroughly aroused Israelite population.

The significance of this apparent outcome of the debacle lies in the demonstration it affords of Gideon's implicit faith in God's promise that He would deliver. Gideon was so sure he would rout the invaders that he stationed the Ephraimites along the river in advance to ensure that they did not get away. He evidently intended to make certain that the Midianites would never invade again. And they did not. The settled nations, Moab, Ammon, Edom, Syria, do figure in later struggles with Israel but not Midian or the peoples of the East. The victory was complete, and it never needed to be repeated.

But Gideon was not finished yet. He meant to destroy Midian utterly. He pursued the pitiable remnant from Abel-meholah across Jordan to Succoth, from Succoth to Penuel, from Penuel to Karkar, and there he caught up with them. There he "discomfited" the remaining fifteen thousand and slew their chiefs Zebah and Zalmunna. It was a terrible slaughter and probably in great part unnecessary, but this was the spirit of the times and there was memory of the past seven years of oppression to be avenged.

Such wholesale massacre, however, does involve the question as to what extent the Lord was responsible. Did God in fact command and empower Gideon to embark upon this career of carnage and destruction. The first hasty answer in most minds might well be "yes" on the strength of the angelic visit to Gideon and the Divine assurance that by his instrumentality Israel was to be delivered. A deeper study of the narrative, however, suggests flaws in this conclusion. There were two phases of this conflict; the first putting of the Midianites to flight by the three hundred men, without the use of arms but solely by trumpets, torches and pitchers, and second, the slaughter

of the host which was effected, not only by the three hundred but all the other thousands of Israelites who at first had been eliminated from the campaign. It is carefully to be noted that the Lord's instructions were limited entirely to the use of torches, with no mention of other armed force. The remaining thirty-odd thousand were expressly ruled out. These, said the Lord, "*are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hands, lest Israel say. . . mine own hand hath saved me*". With the panic flight of the enemy the deliverance was accomplished; had there been no opposing force of Ephraimites at Beth-barah they would have got clean across Jordan and away. They would not have come back that year at any rate. The Lord would have fulfilled his promise to deliver, and that without the use of weapons of war. It is significant that this is as far as the Lord's instructions went; there is nothing said about bringing back the rejected thirty thousand and in fact He did definitely say that He did not want them to participate in the victory. It might well be therefore that this part of the campaign was not of the Lord's command and measurably heedless of his will. Having got the enemy on the run, Israel could not resist the temptation to finish them off in traditional fashion.

This was always Israel's undoing. At the Exodus God told them they had no need to fight when they entered the Promised Land; He himself would go before them and give them entrance, and He himself would eliminate the inhabitants "*by little and little*" - evidently by natural decrease - so that they could enter into full occupancy without war. They would not have it that way; they relied rather upon their own war-like propensities and in consequence they spent ten years in savage warfare and even then never really succeeded in completely eliminating the idolatrous inhabitants from the land. The same experience befalls Christians, collectively and individually. The Lord will fight for us if we let him, but if on the contrary we insist upon employing the arm of the flesh He will leave us to do so and experience the consequences. It worked that way with Gideon and his men. That failure to know the Divine leading implicitly all the time led later to misappropriation of the spoils of war and that in turn to a new idolatry which, as the old chronicler says regretfully "*became a snare to Gideon and to his house*".

For when those thousands came back to their own land rejoicing in their victory and began the work of sharing out the spoil gathered from the Midianites' abandoned camp, it is evident they had completely forgotten the part God had played in this whole affair and were crediting the outcome to their own valour and power, just as the Lord had foretold in ch. 7.2. "*Rule thou over us*" they said to Gideon "*both thou and thy son, and thy son's son also; for thou hast delivered us from the hand of Midian*" (ch. 8.22). How evident it is that their success had gone to their heads and they were now dreaming of a nation organised on a basis of military strength and governed by a king like the

nations around them. Several centuries later Israel was to ask Samuel to make them a king for the same reason and it is not always realised that the first attempt of Israel to choose themselves a king was here in the days of Gideon. So soon after their deliverance were they forgetting the basic principle of their nationhood, that the Lord was their king and they themselves all brethren together. So it has been, sadly, so many times with Christian believers through the centuries, the urge to set up visible leaders who will head a group or company gathered around some particular thesis or ideal, which itself takes on such an importance that the headship and guidance of Christ is forgotten and the power of the Holy Spirit in the community becomes submerged under the more immediate appeal of human power and policies. *"Make us gods to go before us"* was the cry of Israel in the wilderness; the cry is still raised and with equally lamentable results.

It is to the honour of Gideon that he flatly declined their offer. *"I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you: the Lord shall rule over you"*. He, at least, knew that the survival of the nation depended on their allegiance to God and the Covenant, and he would not be a party to any innovation which denied that basic principle. He was prepared to remain a military leader, a "judge" in the sense of this term in the Book of Judges - the word really means one who stands up to defend the right and deliver the oppressed and was applied to all the deliverers of Israel from enemy oppression in the period preceding the monarchy - and so classed himself with Joshua, Othniel and others who before him had delivered the nation but accepted no election to high office nor suffered the creation of a hereditary kingly dynasty in Israel. Gideon had been an instrument in the Lord's hands for the deliverance of Israel; he gave all the glory to the Lord and took nothing for himself and with that he was content.

But he made one sad mistake. The final episode in the story shows how fatally easy it is for even the most ardent and faithful follower of the Lord to be taken off his guard in some perhaps seemingly insignificant thing which mushrooms into a serious breach of the Divine standards or some deep-rooted canker in the life. In Gideon's case it may have seemed quite harmless at the time, just a somewhat irregular means of giving honour to God admittedly not altogether in line with his precepts, but in its effect, as the chronicler says in ch. 8.27 it *"became a snare unto Gideon, and to his house"*

That story must form the subject of another chapter. It must tell, not of a resounding victory and mighty deliverance wrought in faith and by the power of God, consequent upon careful adherence in the first place to the leading of God, but of an endeavour to do honour to God in a manner not commanded by him and in violation of his ordained arrangements. It reveals how the highest ideals can become polluted by the lowest of standards if they are not fashioned

in accordance with the expressed will of God and what could have become the greatest triumph lead at last into deepest tragedy.

AOH

To be concluded

EKKLESIA

The use of the Greek word

The '*ekklesia*' included everybody. In the days of ancient Athens, the *ekklesia* was when all the citizens were called together. Any citizen must come. When there were national decisions to be taken, war to be declared, magistrates to be elected, all were expected to take part. Everybody had a voice, it was an assembly of equals. In the Greek world before Christ, the word came to mean any assembly of citizens duly convened - it was a solemn occasion, and the Greek gods were set up in place to dignify the meeting.

Ekklesia was the word used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew word *qahal*, which is an assembly of the people summoned by God. It was a *qahal* when they were summoned to Horeb, that time when they were terrified of the voice of God (Deuteronomy 16.18). It was an enormous *qahal* when the people in their hundreds assembled to the Lord as one man at Mizpah, the purpose to punish the Benjamites for their atrocity (Judges 20.2). King Solomon blessed all the assembly of Israel who were summoned to the consecration of the newly completed temple (1 Kings 8.14). The *qahal* (*ekklesia*) implies God's people being called together by God, in order to listen to Him or act for Him. The *ekklesia* was not a selected company, it included everybody whom God was calling.

And so in the New Testament *ekklesia* is the Greek word for the church. It is a body of people 'not so much assembling because they have chosen to come together, but assembling because God has called them to himself' (Barclay). They do not meet to share their own opinions, they meet to hear the voice of God.

The 'church' is a general term, which includes all believers. In 1 Corinthians 10.32 Paul speaks of not upsetting Jews, who were people with their own beliefs and traditions scattered all over the world, or Greeks likewise — or the church of God. It is in the church, speaking widely, that God appointed apostles, prophets, teachers, workers of miracles, healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in tongues (1 Corinthians 12.28). It was the

church, generally, that Paul persecuted (Philippians 3.6)

But there were also local churches. At Cenchreae the church had Phoebe for a deaconess (Romans 16.1) and Paul commended her. Paul also speaks of the church, of God, at Corinth (1 Corinthians 1.2) who are called to be saints, as well as those in every other place who called on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. In Galatia there were a number of local churches to whom Paul addressed his letter (Galatians 1.2).

Each local company of believers meeting together constituted a church (1 Corinthians 11.18). Sometimes the results of the meeting were unfortunate, in this particular case arguments, divisions, drunkenness. Meeting 'in church', in the assembly, was a responsibility, in particular a responsibility to say things that people could understand. Five words understood were better than 10,000 words not understood (1 Corinthians 14.18). Everything should be done 'decently and in order' (v.40).

All the little local meetings of believers called by God were part of the whole wide *ekklesia*. And wherever there are separate groups of believers, separated for whatever reason, each believer belongs to the *ekklesia* of God which is all-inclusive.

What does the church consist of? It is composed of people. Nowhere in scripture does church mean a building. But it is not just people, it comes from God and belongs to Him. And Christ is the Head of the church (Ephesians 5.23,4), so we are, or should be, under his control. 'It ought to be according to the mind and thought and will of Christ that the whole *ekklesia* lives and moves.' The *ekklesia* in fact acts as Christ's body (Colossians 1.24). It is through us that He is seen - what a challenge!

Even our homes can be the place of a house-church (Romans 16.5; Colossians 4.15; Philemon 2). Prisca and Aquila, Nympha, Philemon were New Testament examples of ones whose homes were consecrated in daily life and became meeting places into which God called them. They were one little part of His grand *ekklesia*.

GC

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*The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord;
She is his new creation by water and the word;
From heaven He came and sought her to be his holy bride;
With his own blood He bought her and for her life He died.*

PHILIP AT THE FESTIVAL

It was a thrill to Philip, one of the twelve, when the Greeks came to him asking to arrange a meeting with Jesus. He had always known Jesus was the Messiah, the Light to all the nations. His friends from Bethsaida, Andrew and Peter had known it even before Jesus came to them by the lake, and told them to come and be with him in his travels. His special friend, Nathanael bar Tholmai had speedily realised it when he met the Son of Joseph, the man from Nazareth. Philip had told Nathanael to 'come and see', and now there they were, members of the chosen twelve.

Philip had always believed that seeing was believing. And what things they had seen! That time near their home town when a massive crowd had come to Jesus for him to heal their troubles and to hear what he was saying, and he had asked Philip how they were going to feed them. Feed them? - with five barley loaves and two little fishes, Andrew had asked. But it had happened. And when the thousands of men had wanted to make Jesus their king he had avoided them, turned down the opportunity to be their ruler. Philip's stock answer to people was 'Come and see' - and now here was another great opportunity, with Greeks at the Passover Festival wanting to meet Jesus.

It was a thrilling time. Jesus had been staying back at Bethany with Mary and Martha - and Lazarus, who he had called back alive out of the grave. And the crowds, as Jesus rode his donkey to the city gates, shouting and welcoming him! Jesus had come back next day to the Temple, and turned out all the profiteers with their money and their animals.... That needed doing. Perhaps these Greeks, here at the Jewish festival, had been in the Court of the Gentiles, and seen it all happen. And now they wanted to meet Jesus personally. It would have to be handled discreetly, so Philip consulted with Andrew and they went to ask Jesus.

Jesus' reply came as a shock to them. "The time has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." So the time was past for private meetings? Jesus, the Son of Man, was going to reveal himself fully. The scripture they heard read often in the synagogue spoke of one like a son of man. He 'came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingdom that all peoples nations and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which shall not pass away and his kingdom one which shall not be destroyed.' Was it the time for that, now? Would Jesus begin to rule the world in his own good way, like a human being and not, as some emperors, like a wild animal? Reign over the Greeks as well as his own people?

But Jesus did not seem triumphant. He was serious, determined, even

sad. What would these Greeks learn from him?

“Truly, truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone, but if it dies it bears much fruit.”

Philip and Andrew looked at one another. Was Jesus talking about actually dying? Him, dying? Was it the Greeks who would have to die, or Jesus himself? And if that was so, what good could it do, for the Greeks or for anyone? Did he want his disciples to die?

Philip looked around, the crowds of Jews full of excitement, the group of Greeks alive with enthusiasm. Jesus spoke.

“He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”

Jesus had always been telling them that, that as his disciples they must put their own wishes, desires, lives even, to one side. He had told them when he sent them out in twos on their own. He had told them when he said the Son of Man must suffer many things, be rejected and be killed - and also be raised from the dead? Self-sacrifice had always been his way of life. Putting others first. Putting the world first.

“If anyone serves me, he must follow me.”

Yes, of course, but where is he leading us?

“And where I am, there shall my servant be.”

The group of disciples looked at one another.

“If anyone serves me, the Father will honour him.”

Yes, eternal life he had said. We can tell the Greeks that, ‘if anyone serves me, the Father will honour him.’ Jesus was speaking very seriously. The Father’s opinion was what mattered. And Jesus had just been speaking of the seed first dying in the earth, before the fruit came. Jesus was facing his own death.

“Now is my soul troubled.”

“And shall I say, Father, save me from this hour?”

“No, for this purpose I have come to this hour.”

Jesus had been speaking almost to himself, but now he was speaking out. “Father, glorify thy name!”

The crowd heard a sound like thunder. Peter and John and James exchanged glances. They had heard a sound like this, a voice, on that mountain when they had been with Jesus and his appearance changed. Andrew thought back to the time by the River Jordan when Jesus of all people had been baptised, there was a voice then. What had this voice now just said? “I have glorified my Name, and I will glorify it again.”

Someone in the crowd was saying an angel had spoken to Jesus.

“That was not a message to me” said Jesus.

There was a hubbub of discussion among the crowd.

“It was a message for you.”

Philip and the others looked thoughtfully at Jesus. No, he did not need a voice from the sky. He had always been confident in his Father. He had taught them to pray to the Father in heaven. It was the same as when he prayed for his Father to hear him about Lazarus. He was praying aloud so the people would know it actually was the Father doing things, answering Jesus' request. Now the Father had acknowledged Jesus again. It was the crisis, the Son of Man was being publicly honoured, the Father's action was being put on display.

“The time has come for the world to be judged. It's ruler is to be cast out.”

Philip asked himself, what if they do kill Jesus? Crucify him? What will it mean? With a surge of rage and despair he thought, it will be the death of the best man who ever lived. It will be victory for his self-seeking enemies and their methods. It will be the victory of evil over good. Jesus had told them about his temptation three years ago in the wilderness, to follow Satan's ways in the world. But all this was proving that Satan was right, that his methods were successful. Or was Jesus submitting of his free will, for his own reason? He would die.

To look at the Master, he was in control. Troubled, yes, but he understood what was happening.

“When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men to myself.”

The crowd seemed partly to understand. But they did not want a temporary Messiah who was going to die. They were shouting out objections. Jesus did not fit their ideas. Who was he really claiming to be? If he was 'lifted up', that would surely be the end for him. How could he draw everybody to himself? Everybody? Some of them wanted to believe him, but they did not know what to think.

“The light is with you for a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, lest the darkness overtake you. If you walk in the dark, you do not know where you are going.”

Jesus knows where he is going, thought Philip. He's like a seed being buried in the earth — and he's being lifted up for all to see - and he's a light that is going out.

“While you have the light, believe in the light.”

“So that you may become sons of light.”

The disciples gazed at Jesus. The crowd burst into frantic discussion, some were angry threatening action, some puzzled. Some believing. A little group of Greeks were discussing how, if Jesus was drawing all men to himself, did they come into it. Sons of light? What did that mean?

And suddenly Jesus had gone. He had once more evaded the crowds,

for his time had not come yet. Not quite. Philip and Andrew and Nathanael and Peter and the other Galileans followed after him, at a little distance, fearful, apprehensive, but determined to be loyal to him, and sure that Jesus knew what he was doing. While they had the Light with them, they would believe in the Light....

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“... AND PETER”

In the grey light of early dawn three women on an errand of love approached timidly a rock-hewn vault. They had come, as early as the Sabbath laws and the darkness of night allowed, to complete a task performed in haste before the Sabbath day began. When the One they loved and followed had been lowered from the Cross and carried to His quiet resting-place, they had enfolded in the winding-sheets some small supply of aromatic spice. The near approach of the compulsory day of rest had cut short the work of embalming, so the body of the Lord had been laid aside and left until the law permitted this service to the dead to be resumed (Luke 23. 56).

With astonishment they found the sealing stone had been removed; by whom, or how, they did not know. Peering into the dark recess, they expected to see the swathed recumbent form of their beloved Lord, upon which, with busy hands, they hoped at length to complete the needed work. Going in, they did not find the body of the Lord, although the grave-clothes lay in their place. To their surprise a living angel from on high replaced the holy dead, whose radiant form struck wonderment and awe into their hearts.

Sensing their fear, the angel spoke, and told them that their Master was alive again, just as He had told them in earlier days. "Go tell these things to his disciples, and Peter, and tell them He will see them in Galilee." "... and Peter!", "To his disciples, *and Peter*" as though, because of his grievous sin, Peter would think he had now no right to consider himself the Lord's disciple.

These were the angel's words, but they revealed the Master's love. The One who told the angel to say that He proposed to meet them in Galilee was the One from whom those two comforting words came. Jesus did not forget Peter's broken anguished heart which wept so sorely at his fall. Jesus had known his man prior to those searching days. "When you come back to yourself, support your brothers and sisters" said Jesus to his then braggart friend (Luke 22. 32). Jesus knew his man, even though he failed and fell. He knew how to soothe and heal his broken heart.

But the Lord did more than that. Somewhere before that first day of the resurrection was done, the Lord found Peter alone, and disclosed himself to

Peter's tear-stained eyes. "He was seen by Cephas" (1 Cot. 15. 5). "The Lord is risen indeed and has appeared to Simon", replied "the eleven" (Luke 24. 34) to the ones returned from Emmaus.

What passed between the Lord and the stricken penitent is veiled in sacred obscurity, but who can doubt that no words of chiding or reproof passed from the Master's lips, but words of soothing tenderness that fell like healing balm on Peter's wounded heart.

"*and Peter!*" Let us write it now "and John! . and Mary! . and Frank! . and Harriet! . and ." everyone who in times of strain has failed and fallen to the dust. It does not need to have been Peter's grievous sin, but each one's own particular slip—that rapier word! that chilling glance! that wounding act! that seeming wrong! The sad consequence of a moment's lack of thought.

When your chastened heart, in retrospect, looks back upon a hasty fall, remember that a watchful eye has seen it all, and in assuring answer to your tears will say again, "... and Peter..." "... and John..." "... and Harriet..." "and and" And so He keeps those who belong to Him, by his own word, in His own way.

BEHOLD HE PRAYETH

"Behold, he prayeth"—is there anything really striking about that? Ought not all lovers of righteousness to pray in times of need and extremity? All, yes! but this occasion is different—and extraordinary!

The speaker was the Risen Lord; the hearer, Ananias; the subject, the persecuting Saul; the place Damascus. (Acts 9. 11).

Some few days prior to this episode, Saul had left Jerusalem, armed with Sanhedrin authority, and accompanied by an escort of Temple guards, for Damascus in the far north, to apprehend and take in bonds to Jerusalem every follower of the Lord he could lay violent hands upon. News of his coming had preceded him, and the little company of believing saints, knowing what had over-taken brethren in Jerusalem, awaited with dread the arrival of this wolf into their midst, knowing there would be neither clemency nor mercy for any whom he might find of "that way".

But as Saul rode on expectantly, exultantly, the thing which a watchful Providence had ordained took place! The blistering mid-day sun turned pale as a heavenly radiance intervened! The very instant of time ordained by Providence had come, and He who angled to take this fish came nigh to sweep

up his "catch"! The days for "playing out the line" had expired, and One from the Heavenly Throne had come near to wield the net.

How piercingly penetrating the challenge request, intended for no ear but his own! "Why persecutest thou Me". , "Who art thou, Lord".. . "I am Jesus". Then it was true, unquestionably true, what these men in Jerusalem had said about the Nazarene! Oh, the horror of the situation in which he now found himself; he had separated man and wife; he had violently compelled some to blaspheme; he had consented to send one good man to untimely death. And here, clothed with more than solar-radiance, was the exalted Lord and Master of the suffering flock!

Gone was the gaiety and self-assurance of the morning hours, as now with blinded eyes and smitten conscience he drags along to go into the city where co-conspirator and victim alike await his coming!

Three days and nights, without food or drink, the inner conflict raged. No former friend or counsellor could be of help in this hour of need. All his past life, particularly the recent past, would rise up before him and taunt him with its futility! Despite intense zeal, he had missed the objects of his soul's desire. . . yet Stephen, a man he could not recall to life, had found all the best it had to give.

Back and forth, from the old things to the new, from the authority of Moses to the exaltation of the Christ, his poor struggling mind would pass, as he attempted to weigh up the values each appeared to possess, until at last his wearied frame, faint from lack of food, and worn out from its internal strain, sank to its knees, and his faltering lips and stammering tongue began to pray!

He had capitulated; the besieging Lord had stormed the fortress of his soul, and was now triumphant there! The battle had been fought and lost . . and won!

And so the compassionate and dominating Lord, desiring to soothe every needless pain, commissions Ananias to "go to the street called Straight, . . and enquire. . . for a man of Tarsus called Saul, for behold he prayeth", "Behold he prayeth"—not in the ancient city of Jerusalem, not with priest or sacrifice attending him, but here, in his darkened room, in this city of Damascus, and with no comfort or help at hand. What a prayer that must have been, as all the flood-gates of his soul were broken down, and all its bitter contents gushed forth in penitence and remorse! How the angels who had watched the long-drawn conflict must have rejoiced at a sinner so sincerely repenting of his former misguided way! And who can tell, or even attempt to tell, what that prostrated form and penitential prayer meant to the supervising Lord?

Never after throughout his whole life did the memories of those days and nights fade from his recollection—they were not intended so to fade—for,

first to himself, and then, through him to countless thousands of a later day, it was intended to teach that "Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners; and I am the foremost of sinners; but I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience for an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life." (I Tim. 1. 15-16).

Not always does the Lord of life and glory come forth in that majestic way to intercept and turn to himself those who misguidedly were seeking the "best" along wrong and improper lines. That He has providentially intercepted such people in his own acceptable way is a truth to which thousands could testify.

That there is an act of Providence in the direction of a word, a phrase, a tract, a book, a visit, a journey, or even an illness, is a fact that none conversant with his way would dare deny. Thousands on thousands could joyfully say:

"I know not why God's wondrous grace
To me has been made known.
Or why, unworthy as I am,
He claimed me for his own."

It is not for everyone to plumb the depths of the subterranean experience as did our brother Paul, for few could withstand the strain. But unnumbered thousands have learned through him, of a Saviour's love and long-suffering of their waywardness, before they bent in lowly penitence before him and prayed their first prayer.

Paul never ceased, throughout life's little day, to remind himself of that tender love which followed him all those headstrong, wayward days, till at last it broke in upon him and brought him face to face with the stern realities of life—and won his heart and soul for ever.

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Lord, for tomorrow and its needs I do not pray;
Keep me from any stain of sin just for today.
Let me both diligently work and duly pray;
Let me be kind in word and deed just for today.
Let me be slow to do my will, prompt to obey;
Help me to sacrifice myself just for today.
Let me no wrong or idle word unthinking say;
Set Thou Thy seal upon my lips just for today.
So for tomorrow and its needs I do not pray,
But keep me, guide me, hold me, Lord, just for today.

PEACE WITH GOD

"Peace with God" is sometimes rather carelessly used in religious circles, as though it had only one connotation, as though all the problems of a complex human personality were solved if only a man would accept the redemptive sacrifice of Christ upon the Cross. Actually this is an oversimplification, for although to accept the reconciliation which God has provided is an absolute essential, there are many other factors which prevent the soul from being at peace. The divine peace, the steady centering of life upon God, is basically a gift from God, and must be accepted, like our forgiveness, as His gift and not something that we can achieve. Nevertheless, there are elements within our own personalities which must be frankly faced before we can expect to experience that gift. If we want to enjoy inward tranquility amid this whirling bewildering modern life, we must be prepared to do some honest self-examination. In the last resort, we shall find that our only true peace is "peace with God", but it may not prove quite so simple to find it as we imagined.

In all of us to a greater or less degree, depending on heredity, upbringing, and temperament, there is a thrusting, self-pleasing element which normally regards the world as centering around oneself. It is not a thing to be horrified at, for it is in us all; but the whole way of thinking and feeling which belongs to the self-centred man must be abrogated or denied before there can be peace with God. What we call "sins" are simply expressions of this self-pleasing, self-regarding, and self-indulgent inward attitude. The word which is translated in the New Testament as repentance really means a thorough change of heart and mind. It means realising that the real centre of everything is not my little self, but God, and that in order to serve the King Himself I must quit the throne of my own precious little kingdom. To some people this comes easily, almost naturally, as soon as they see the truth of it. To others it means a hard and even agonising struggle. Such people do not readily surrender, they do not easily co-operate with somebody else's plan, even if that Somebody Else is God. Yet it is obvious that there can be no inward peace until the self-conscious inward kingdom willingly and wholeheartedly concedes its rights to the Creator, the real King.

This is the essential of all Christian living, but in actual experience it does not happen all at once. A man may not realise how strong and deeply entrenched is his own self-interest until he has followed Christ even for years. It is the willing co-operation that God is seeking, the cheerful enlisting in His service. Certain types of people can be scared into being "saved" or "converted", but it does not necessarily follow that they willingly hand over the centre of their being to the service of Christ. As far as we can judge from

the New Testament, people are not frightened into becoming Christians. Jesus required His followers to be "fishers of men", and the ability to instil fear is not a prime qualification for a fisherman! In the classic instance of sudden conversion - that is, of Paul - it is interesting to note that there is no threat of hell-fire, not even of reproach in the words Jesus spoke to him in the vision on the Damascus road. We might well have thought that the man who had been responsible for the death, disgrace, misery, and imprisonment of so many of Christ's men and women would naturally have incurred the wrath of the Lord Himself. But what do we find? A penetrating question, asking in effect: "*Why* are you behaving like this towards Me?" And a highly significant comment: "It is not easy for you to go against your own conscience." Paul saw in a blinding moment of revelation how the whole structure of his righteous living, including his violent persecutions of the truth, had been utterly self-centred. What is more, he saw the Lord personally, and the consequence of seeing himself as he was and Christ as He was resulted in a thorough-going conversion. Such complete visions of the truth are rare. But it is as this same truth strikes home to men by the power of the Spirit that they realise the true position - how off course they are, what harm their self-centred living has caused, and how they can be at peace only if they are reconciled with the Nature and Purpose of God.

If we are quiet before God and allow His Spirit to shine upon our inward state, we shall probably discover more than one conflict which is robbing us of inner peace. The man who lives apart from God may be largely unconscious of his inward conflicts and only aware of their tension. Of course he may be driven by the sheer force of the tension to a psychiatrist who, if he is a wise one, will help the man to realise the sources of his disharmony. But he still will not be at peace with the nature of things, with his own conscience, and the Divine Purpose that is being worked out in this world unless the psychiatrist is able to lead him to faith in God. But except in unusual cases, the Christian need not turn to the psychiatrist. Either alone with God or with the help of a trusted friend, priest, or minister, he can, if he wishes, see for himself the fierce, hidden resentment, the carefully concealed self-importance, the obstinate and unforgiving spirit, and all the other things which prevent inward relaxation. So long as his personality is a battleground, it is foolish to suggest to him that he accepts the peace of God. His hidden desires, ambitions, and prides must first be brought to the surface, not only to the surface of his own consciousness, but, as it were, to the light of God's love and understanding. God is not concerned to condemn; however ashamed and guilty the man himself may feel, God is concerned to heal and harmonise.

A THOUGHT CAME

I was browsing through the hymn book, looking for a hymn to sing on Mothering Sunday - not that one day is any more important than another, but we do like to respect our mothers - when I came upon what I considered a very masculine hymn. It was 'For the might of thy arm we bless Thee, O God, our fathers' God'. No, definitely not a hymn for Mothering Sunday. It gave a picture of a pilgrim people being shepherded along the journey of life. The company were bound together by Christ's love. They had faith in truth and freedom. They walked in the peace of the gospel. They had a beacon of hope, and a legacy from those who had travelled the way before, a legacy of courage and Christian obedience. The God of their fathers protected them, and for the might of his arm they blessed Him.

One could imagine the hymn being written by someone who knew about the dangers of being Christ's follower. Perhaps, a pastor in the nonconformist tradition, who was thinking back to those who had travelled this difficult road before him, maybe persecuted by those in authority. They lived in a hard world, needing God's strength to keep them safe in the struggle to remain a believer, just as men of faith had done for thousands of years. It was an inspiring hymn, but not for Mother's Day. Even the name of the tune to which it was set, 'Mountain Christians', seemed to speak of effort and energy. Not, of course, that there are not women who are brave, energetic leaders. I suppose I was really looking for something more 'feminine'?

I discovered that the writer, Charles Sylvester Horne, had lived at the end of the nineteenth century. His father was a congregational minister, and he too became a minister. Brought up in Shropshire, he gained fame as a minister in London, and became a Member of Parliament. Of his seven children, the youngest son became a humorous broadcaster!

But this was not finding a suitable hymn for Mothers' Day. Mind you, this hymn had a good tune, and why should the men have all the good tunes? Why not set some new words to it which would reflect the maternal side of life? What follows is the result of that thought.

*For the strength of your love we bless you,
that is ours through good or ill.
You have kept us ever faithful,
with a love that holds us still.
In every generation
you help us to obey.
For the strength of your love we bless you
our mothers' God today.*

*From mother on to daughter
your faithful love is shown;
In following generations
we make your love our own.
O keep the faith fire burning
to cheer us on your way.
For the strength of your love we bless you
our mothers' God today.*

*Through pain and disappointments,
through joy and family love,
Through birth and life and dying
you call us on, above.
We trust our homes to you, Lord
be with us as we pray;
For the strength of your love we bless you
our mothers' God today.*

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THE CELESTIAL WORLD

This visible universe is not the only sphere of life. The experiences and convictions of many testify that there is a world of living intelligence above and beyond the physical, not perceptible to any of the five human senses but a real world nevertheless. Sometimes it is called the spiritual world and its citizens spiritual beings because it lies beyond the bounds of man's senses and sometimes the celestial world, because it lies beyond the bounds of man's geography.

Our own universe is an atomic structure built up from ninety-two elements, ranging from hydrogen the lightest to uranium the heaviest — discounting a few heavier man-made ones — which, by chemical combination with each other, form all known substances, and powered by radiated energy vibrating at rates between a hundred thousand times a second and many, many millions, technically called the 'electro-magnetic spectrum'. Everything in this universe obeys the laws set by this atomic structure and this energy range. What may lie outside of these, we do not know and as men will never know since all our knowledge is derived from observational instruments which themselves are constructed from these atoms and can respond only to these energy vibrations.

Our information regarding the celestial world comes to us through the Bible, the revelation of God, Creator of both this world and that, supplemented a little in our own day by the reasoning of men whose deepening knowledge of the physical world is enabling them vaguely to see what possibilities may conceivably lie beyond it. The decline of Christian belief characteristic of the past century or more, had led to a very general scepticism as to the experience of a 'spiritual' world and of 'spiritual' beings. The leaders of scientific thought and research have for a number of generations ignored any claims for the reality of anything that could not be demonstrated physically, either by the natural senses or some man-made observing or measuring instrument. But now some of these scientists are not so sure; they are beginning to perceive the possibility that there can be and might well be some kind of world and some kind of life outside the scope of our physical universe and in so doing they concede the case to the Bible. In this, as in so many matters nowadays, the progress of scientific discovery is demonstrating the intrinsic harmony of science with Divine revelation.

At a conference of high level United States physicists in 1967, during a discussion on the problems of detecting life in space it was said that we may no longer insist that life can only be manifested in material bodies such as ours, bodies of micro-cellular structure. There is no certainty that an entirely different form of life structure is not possible. At a rather earlier date another atomic physicist, appearing in a B.B.C. feature, referred to the possible existence of other universes dependent on other forces not capable of interaction with our own, so that they might conceivably exist, so to speak, on a different wave-length and be quite imperceptible to us although present in reality all the time. Firsoff, in "Life beyond the earth" suggests that there is "no reason why longer or shorter wavelengths" (than those of the electromagnetic spectrum, which govern all the phenomena of our universe) "could not form the basis of sensory perception ... we cannot be sure that there are no other forms of vibrant energy that could be so used... these may not be obstructed by living tissues, and so the organs of perception or emission may be in the brain". All this is to say that modern scientific thought no longer denies the possibility of a world which is a real world but beyond our powers to perceive, inhabited by living intelligences who themselves cannot be perceived by man but can make their presence known, and communicate directly, to the human brain. This is the Biblical position; that world and those beings are given, by the Apostle Paul, the name 'celestial'.

The inhabitants of the celestial world are popularly termed "angels" and are depicted in religious pictures and sculpture as white-robed human beings, furnished with wings for the purpose of travel from the realms above. (This particular form was developed long before men knew that the earth's atmosphere extends only a few miles up and that wings are useless in space).

The term 'angel' is the Greek word carried over into English; in both the Old and New Testaments the respective Hebrew and Greek words mean, simply and solely, a messenger. This is derived from the fact that whenever the Bible tells of a celestial being visiting the earth, he comes, naturally, as a messenger, with a commission to fulfil. But in this coming he must of necessity make himself apparent to men. One of the powers characteristic of celestial beings is evidently that of metamorphosing or 'materialising' into a human form which they can create for the time being from the elements of the earth around, a question of manipulating so much carbon, oxygen, hydrogen and so on to attain the desired end. The alchemists of the Middle Ages spent a lot of time trying to transmute the elements — turning lead into gold was their chief aim — without success. Nowadays it is becoming a commonplace, such as, for instance, the conversion of natural gas into protein cattle food. There is nothing too wonderful today in thinking of a visitant to this earth thus clothing himself temporarily with an earthly body in order to render himself visible and audible. In the majority of instances such visitants appeared as ordinary men, as in the case of the three who visited Abraham (Gen. 18), those who appeared to Joshua (Josh.5), Gideon (Jud.6), Manoah (Jud.13) and so on. Sometimes the appearance was in the form of a transcendently glorious being, but still human, as to Daniel (Dan. 10) but only when the importance of the occasion made it appropriate. New Testament manifestations to Zacharias, Mary, Peter and Paul were of the same general nature. Our Lord, after his resurrection and until his ascension, having been raised in the glory of his celestial nature, appeared to his disciples in human form assumed for the occasion — a gardener to Mary, a stranger on the way to Emmaus, and so on. One has to picture the celestial being as completely independent of the physical characteristics of our universe, able to come and go at will and adapt himself to whatever local conditions exist.

This leads to the reflection that the celestials must possess powers of mobility, to use a human expression, of a totally different nature from those of man. It has already been remarked that man's hopes of travelling to the distant stars are tempered with the reflection that such journeys must inevitably take thousands or millions of years. The nature of celestial life imposes no such limitations. The angel sent to Daniel in response to his impassioned prayer upon behalf of Israel (Dan.9) appeared to him at about three o'clock in the afternoon of the day on which the prophet began his supplication. Even allowing for six hours' praying, if the angel was subject to human limitations of movement from one place to another and even travelled at the speed of light when he started he could not have been farther away than the outermost planet of the solar system, Pluto. Prof. Einstein gives reasons why, in his view, nothing can possibly travel faster than light.

No one is going to suggest that Heaven is situated on the dark and cold

chaos which is Pluto. There is, too, an interesting little reflection on those three men who visited Abraham. Two of them left the patriarch at not earlier than three in the afternoon to walk to Sodom, forty miles distant over rugged and trackless mountainous terrain. They arrived there before five! It is clear that once out of Abraham's sight those two angels abandoned human form, and adopted their own natural methods of transit before appearing again as men at the gates of Sodom two hours later. It would appear that a characteristic of the celestial nature is the power of what we would call instantaneous translation from one place to another irrespective of distance.

All this might lead to the conclusion that celestial beings are disembodied intelligences, like powerful minds without bodies, having no real world of their own, but just existing in space. In warning against this, the Apostle Paul makes it clear that just as earthly, terrestrial creatures possess bodies, organisms, by means of which the mind can make contact with its environment and know itself for what it is, so with the celestial. "There are celestial bodies, and there are terrestrial bodies, but the glory of the celestial is one, and the glory of the terrestrial is another... there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body ...as we have borne the image of the earthly, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly" (1 Cor.15). Celestial beings are real beings with bodies suited to their environment and powers, and they exist in a real environment or world. Just as men can live only by absorbing energy from food, air and sunlight wherewith to power their thoughts and actions, so in some similar way celestial beings, whose lives are sustained by God just as surely as are those of men, must absorb and give out energy, which has its source ultimately in God, in living their lives and carrying out their activities. Likewise must the celestial world be a real world constituting an environment in which those beings are 'at home' and which provides all things needful both for continued life and continued activity.

This latter is an important consideration. The idea that the "other world" or the "future life" is a place or state in which nothing is ever done and nothing new ever happens is ethically unsound and theologically incorrect. One might have some sympathy with the legendary charwoman, who, after a life time of hard work, had her tombstone bear the words "Gone to do nothing for ever and ever" but an eternity of idleness is likely to be more frustrating than comforting. Nearly fifty years ago J.W.Dunne, in one of his books, pointed out that if a man was placed in a world in which everything was done for him and he was never required to take any decision or make any effort so that the mind had nothing to do and the brain responded automatically to every changing situation, then in time that man would become an unconscious automaton; he would cease to think and cease to be a human being. In more recent years British and Canadian Universities have conducted experiments, in the interest of astronaut research, to discover what happens when a man is

deprived of all external sense impressions by being enclosed in a cubicle without light or sound or anything to do. It was found that thinking became difficult after a few hours and no subject could tolerate more than a few days of the condition. Similar experiments in the United States led to the conclusion that unless the mind is stimulated by outward impressions and changing phenomena, growth and development cease. If continued long enough the condition would lead to unconsciousness and death. It follows that an essential factor in continuing life is change and activity and this must be as true in the celestial sphere as in the terrestrial. It is not surprising therefore that we find casual allusion in the Scriptures to this aspect of the celestial world. "Bless the Lord, O you his angels" says David "you mighty ones who do his word, hearkening to the voice of his word. Bless the Lord, all his hosts, his ministers that do his will" (Psa. 103.20-21). Here is a vivid picture of powerful beings dedicated to the service of God and living their lives in devoted activity according to his will. The nature of their occupations and achievements are of necessity unknown to us and in any case would be largely incomprehensible; man's only contact has been the occasional visit of solitary messengers for brief periods in past times. One can imagine a remote island inhabited only by primitive people to whom a very occasional westerner comes on a brief visit and goes away again; how much of the multifarious activities and the achievements of western civilisation on earth could those simple people be expected thus to glean? All we can say is that the scope and the grandeur of life in that celestial world and the variety of its accomplishments must be infinitely greater than anything that a man could imagine. This much at least is indicated by the inspired words of the eighth Psalm, wherein man is described as created a little lower than the angels even though constituted the custodian and administrator of all other living things on earth. It is apparent also from Job 38.7 that at the time of terrestrial creation the celestial world already existed and its citizens "shouted for joy" at what was to them a new departure in divine creative activity. That the celestials, although of vastly superior intellectual powers to humans, are subject to limitations in knowledge is inferred from Scriptures indicating that they are not cognisant of all that God purposes to do (Mark 13.32, 1 Pet. 1.12). That they evince an intense interest in the work of God amongst men can be concluded from the statements that there is joy among the angels in heaven over one sinner that repents (Luke 15.10) and some indication in Matt. 18.10 that one of their duties, or the duty of some of them, is the protective oversight of Christ's disciples here on earth. There may be more in the old idea of 'guardian angels' than this present-day matter-of-fact world is prepared to concede. It might be justifiable to think that in the new earth of the future, when evil is banished and man reconciled to God, there will be closer and much more frequent contact between the two

worlds than is the case or is even possible at this present time. There is no sin in that world; its citizens are altogether and in every respect conformed to the Divine ideal, fully developed and occupying their ordained place in creation. As such that world forms a model for this and one day this earth and its society will be like that. The 'Lord's Prayer' is one authority for that expectation; "thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven". Twin principles expounded by Christ — love for God and love for neighbour — must there exercise universal sway, and in the power of so dynamic and orderly a righteous society it can be expected that united and co-operative effort and achievement carries life ever onward into widening realms of unimaginable splendour. This is the Christian Heaven. The hope which the New Testament holds out to all faithful dedicated disciples of Christ is that following the close of terrestrial life they will experience a resurrection to enduring life in that world. The Apostle Paul speaks of those who "sleep in Jesus" and are awakened by instantaneous translation to the celestial sphere at the Second Advent of Christ when He comes to establish his Millennial Kingdom upon earth (1 Thess. 4. 14-17. 1 Cor. 15. 51-52). The future life of the Church in eternal association with Christ involves a great deal of Apostolic teaching which is not relevant to the present subject, it may well be, though, that our Lord's declaration in Jno. 14. 2-3 to the effect despite the "many mansions" in his Father's house He must needs go away to prepare a place for his followers is a hint that the world in which the Church finds its ultimate home is one created on a still higher level of sentient life, beyond even the angelic celestial. Such may be necessary in order to fulfil in transcendent measure the promise that He will present us "faultless before the presence of his Father with exceeding joy" (Jude 24). This also is one of the many unrevealed aspects of the future which will one day be made plain. Beyond the lengthening vistas of all such possible celestial spheres, above the highest and most glorious of all created forms of life, is God, the Author and sustainer of all creation, the source of all life, of all energy, of all that is. In that incomprehensible Presence is enshrined the supreme mystery, a mystery which, perhaps, none of His creatures will ever fathom. Without beginning, without end, omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent, "even from everlasting to everlasting thou art God". All that we are, all that we shall be, is of Him.

AOH

FUTURE DAYS

An extract taken from a convention address

As students of the Bible we all look forward to the forth-coming Days. 'The Day of the Lord', the 'Day of Christ' and the 'Day of God'.

There are many expressions "Day of the Lord" throughout our Bible. In the OT, Obadiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel Joel and Amos all indicate various aspect of "The Day". It is clear it can be a time of destruction or blessing dependant on one's faith in God. In Amos, for example, "*The Day*" is to be "*longed for*" by the righteous. The message then, is that its coming is inevitable. But when? Once we turn to the NT we find an "updated" version, as it were. It sheds new light on the "*Day of the Lord*" by expanding the period to include judgment before and subsequent to the return of our Lord. From this we conclude that "*The Day of the Lord*" has a broad meaning – a period of time longer than 24 hours.

The present age, which commenced with the coming of the Holy Spirit, will end with its removal from the world at the time when the Lord Jesus Christ will personally come down from heaven, the dead in Christ will be raised up and together with the living Saints be caught up to meet Him in the air – never again to be separated from Him or from each other. All members of the Church, the body of Christ, will be caught up in this way. It is, of course, most vividly described, in one of our favourite passages of Paul writing to the Thessalonian Church. (1Thess 4:13 – 5:10).

Later, the Thessalonian brethren it seems had 'jumped the gun' and assumed the day had already come, so Paul wrote them another letter: "*Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come. Don't let anyone deceive you in any way.... until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed*". (2 Thess 2:1 – 3).

Look more closely at the opening sentence: "*Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him*". This is the most wonderful and encouraging promise to which we all look forward. Now look what Paul calls this in the same sentence: "*as though the Day of Christ had come*". More modern translations render this as "*The Day of the Lord*". Thus we see "*Our gathering together*" begins the time period of "The Day of the Lord". It is like 12 o/c Midnight. It both ends the day that is 'the Church age' and begins the next – "The Day of the Lord". Notice it will come suddenly like "*a thief in the night*" and must be longer than 24 hours for the many events to take place.

Peter confirms this. Our reading: 2 Peter 3:10 – 12 *“But the Day of the Lord will come like a thief The heavens will disappear with a shrill noise ... and the earth with everything in it will vanish. Since all these things will be destroyed. ... what kind of people should you be? Your lives should be holy and dedicated ... as you wait for the Day of God and do your best to make it come soon – the Day when the heavens will burn up and be destroyed”*. Peter’s prophecy is a big picture in a small package! He confirms Paul in that *“The Day”* comes suddenly. However, Peter goes straight to the culmination of *“The Day of the Lord”* which is at the end of the Millennium Kingdom on earth, the *“Day of God”* when there will be the new heavens and the new earth. So Peter helps us understand that the *“Day of the Lord”* extends to the *“Day of God”* and the coming of a new heavens and a new earth.

Finally, The Apostle John assists us further in our study. In Rev 20 we find the only verses specifically relating to the millennium. *“1000 years”* is mentioned in each of verses 2 to 7. *They came and ruled as kings with Christ for a thousand years. they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and they will rule with him for a thousand years”*. They will sit with Him and act as the heaven-ordained Government of the Kingdom of God. This is the time when God makes all things new and wipes away the tears from every eye. Death, sorrow, crying and pain will be abolished. But when will this certain event come about?

To determine a date for these Days, we must study the calendar! The calendar provided by Daniel in his prophecy in Dan 9 is a masterpiece. It involves careful understanding of Lunar and Solar years and requires knowledge of both Biblical and historical facts. There is also a little mystery, as we are dealing with weeks – or sevens, to be interpreted as years. Gabriel explained the meaning of this to Daniel after his dream. The calendar was to commence with the issuing of a command to free Daniel’s people and restore the ruined city of Jerusalem. Artaxerxes, the king, gave this order to his cupbearer, Nehemiah in 445 BC. The 70 weeks were divided into 3 sections, 7 weeks (or 49 years), 62 weeks (434 years) and one week (of 7 years). Jerusalem was rebuilt in the first period. (Not without trouble if you read the detail in the book of Nehemiah!) The second 434 years ran from the expiration of the first 49 years *“unto the anointed one – the Messiah – the Prince”*. Then, as Daniel so abruptly puts it in the King James: *“Messiah shall be cut off”*. The crucifixion of our Lord and Saviour happened, as we well know, followed by *“the destruction of the city and Temple by the invading army of a powerful ruler”* – exactly as prophesied, by the Roman army in AD 70. This concluded the 69th week.

But what of the 70th week? Has it begun? Did it follow on? Has there been any sign of a seven-year treaty as Daniel prophesied? Not to our

knowledge. The 70th week has not begun – The Prince, The Ruler, the Awful Horror or Man of Lawlessness of Dan 9:27 has not yet appeared on the World stage. We are in a sort of parenthesis which, so far, has lasted almost 2 millennia. Daniel gave a hint of this parenthesis when he placed events between the 69th and 70th week ‘*until the end*’ of the age. It is only after the words ‘*until the end*’ that he introduces the last week of 7 years.

So we must be patient and maintain our faith and hope until Daniel’s 70th week is imminent and those final 7 years will be brought about.

Our final point: In our Bible Study Group some time ago, we read the following – again from Daniel: “*Daniel, close up and seal the words of the scroll until the time of the end. Many will go here and there to increase knowledge.*” (Dan 12:4. NIV). *Increase knowledge* ... Just think how much knowledge has advanced in our lifetime! ... Medicine ... planes ... TV ... mobile phones ... computers – everything digital, to name just a few. Science confirms we are surely at the “*end times*”. The “*end time*” – the day – the day when we are closer to the return of Jesus Christ.

The present day too is a day which the Lord has made. “*This day*” now! “*we will rejoice*” Do we? Do we thank our Heavenly Father for all that we enjoy – our homes - our families and friends – and the freedom we have to gather together and worship the God we love, in peace and tranquility? However most of all, we are grateful for the promise of those wonderful days that lie ahead.

The Psalmist wrote: “*Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let the sea resound, and all that is in it; let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them. Then all the trees of the forest will sing for joy; they will sing before the LORD*”. (Psa 96:11. KJV).

DSS

PRAISING GOD WITH HEART AND VOICE

It is our duty to praise God, and we have every good reason to praise Him. But we do not always ‘feel’ like it. Is saying the right words, because it is what is expected of us, what praise is all about? Is there a right technique to make us truly grateful?

This poem tells the experience of someone - perhaps a young Christian? - who finds the effort to praise God obediently following the example of others is self-defeating, but discovers that praise will come

spontaneously from a grateful heart.

“Praise God from whom all blessings flow
Rejoice in the Lord always!”

*I sing the words aloud, but no
My heart's not in the praise
True praise mounts up on eagle's wing
I only read the words and sing*

“Praise God from whom all blessings flow
Praise Him all creatures here below”

*I go to church and kneel in prayer
Correctly as I should,
I seek God in the open air
and worship in the wood
No use, whatever place I try
My phrases bounce back off the sky.*

“Praise God with all your heart and voice
Rejoice, again I say rejoice!”

*I bow my head, I lift my hands
I worship like the rest
Obedient to their commands
Trying which way is best
Silent or spoken, sung or said
My words are vain, my worship's dead.*

Come now to Me, my way is best

And I will give the weary rest

*O Lord, I want to praise you Lord
For sunset, seas and foam
For Jesus, come to show Your love
Who brings me safely home
You are so great, forgiving, kind
Help me to praise with heart and mind!*

“Praise God, from whom all blessings flow
Praise Him on high through all the days”

*I'll praise His love where'er I go
And I'll rejoice in Him always
No need to search for worship's art
With quiet rejoicing in my heart*

QUIZ

Who was

- 1 the brother of Andrew?
- 2 Rachel's elder sister?
- 3 hewed in pieces by Samuel?
- 4 watered where Paul had planted?
- 5 a Jezreelite who had a vineyard?
- 6 up a tree?
- 7 husband of Sapphira?
- 8 ruler of the synagogue at Corinth?
- 9 a beloved physician?
- 10 a blind beggar, son of Timaeus?
- 11 previously known as Sarai?
- 12 king of Salem?
- 13 killed with a tent peg?
- 14 otherwise known as Dorcas?
- 15 brother to Chilion?
- 16 Hosea's wife?
- 17 thought to be rewarded by God for his obedience?
- 18 a young man sitting in a window?
- 19 treated Paul kindly
- 20 Timothy's grandmother?

Answers on page 80.

x x x x x

The early church possessed a collection of the letters written by Ignatius of Antioch, about 115AD. He wrote them during the last seven weeks of his life when he was being taken to Rome, where he would be martyred for his faith. It was a time when there were problems with false teaching, and Ignatius was concerned about the need for unity. He was expecting to die. As he was escorted towards Rome, Ignatius was visited by many church representatives, and he was constantly both sending and receiving letters, and passing on news. To such places as Ephesus, Magnesia, Tralles, Troas, Philadelphia, Philippi, Smyrna and Antioch. He quoted texts from parts of what has become our Bible, such as Matthew, Corinthians, Ephesians and Timothy. Once a letter reached a congregation it would be read out, copied, and passed on to the next church.

DAY OF SALVATION

*“Working together with him, then, we entreat you not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says ‘At the acceptable time I have listened to you and helped you on the **day of salvation.**”* 2 Corinthians 2.2

Behold **now** is the Day of Salvation. 2 Corinthians chapters 3,4 & 5 contrasts the Old Law Covenant with the New Covenant the testimony of which is written on human hearts not tablets of stone.

Disobedience had caused separation from God. Salvation from God had meant that separation could now come to an end. In the unfolding purpose of God He had through the prophet Isaiah promised salvation, that there would be a Day of Salvation, and that day, wrote Paul, has arrived. Throughout his letters to the Churches Paul went to great length to show the need of saving from sin and that salvation could come through Christ whose death on the cross brought salvation.

Jesus having died, salvation was secured as Peter had declared on the Day of Pentecost.

Paul in 2 Corinthians 3 speaks of testimonial letters not paper nor stone but hearts – written by God’s Spirit, Paul makes this appeal following his long exposition about the Covenants and his appeal to ‘Be reconciled’ to God. He does so he says as a minister of the New Covenant. Explaining that the purpose of a covenant is reconciliation to God. There is no fear in seeing the glory of the Lord as there had been in Israel when Moses appeared among them in the desert of Sinai. In fact this vision of Christ has a transforming power in our lives.

His quotation from the Servant Song day of salvation is not a 24 day but an epoch or an unspecified long period of time, as days or epochs in Genesis 1. Paul quotes Isaiah 49.8 (part of the Servant Song) and states that day of salvation **has come**. Jacob, as Israel, was (Genesis 49.18) prophetically able as he was saying ‘good-bye’ to his family to say that there would come a ‘day of salvation’. Just as Israel was in bondage in Egypt, God’s people in bondage of sin are yet to enjoy a day of release from sin.

What is ‘salvation’? - so Paul in Romans 3.23 *“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”* All need salvation. Humanity rebelled from the beginning – Romans 1. Freedom of choice continues. “God gave them over that he might have mercy on all (Romans 11.32) but some chose to walk with him, so touched were they by his great love. What is their salvation? When Peter and John at the Temple gate healed a crippled man (Acts 4.10,12) and were questioned by Jewish rulers they replied “by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth ...there is salvation in no one else”. In Romans 3. 6 the Gospel is

“the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith.” The means of salvation is in John 3.16 ‘God so loved’... it is so simple yet so profound that it is often misunderstood and God is not taken at his word. In it lies Christ’s comprehensive work of atonement. Colossians 1.13-20 ‘all things created through him and for him’. All things in earth and heaven reconciled – through the cross.

Paul in Athens on Mars Hill (Acts 17.30-31) said “*the times of this ignorance God overlooked but now he commands all men everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed and of this he has now given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead.*” “**All men everywhere... now.**” It is the same teaching – told from a different angle in a different way – man’s need through sin and ignorance, and only God meets that need and provides a way of escape. He meets the need by man’s belief in a resurrected Son whose return brings salvation for all.

DN

*Jesus is seeking the wanderer yet
Why do they roam’
Love only waits to forgive and forget
Home! Weary wanderers Home!
Wonderful love dwells in the heart of the Father above.*

x

*I am a stranger here, within a foreign land
My home is far away upon a golden strand
Ambassador to be of realms beyond the sea
I’m here on business for my king.*

*This is the message that I bring
A message angels fain would sing
Oh be ye reconciled – thus saith my Lord and King
Oh be ye reconciled to God*

*You would not turn away and spurn his proffered grace
If you could only see the love upon his face
Your hearts he fain would reach, through me he doth beseech
And that’s my business for my king.*

Alexander No.3. No.126

Preaching and Teaching

Our Lord enshrined two distinct thoughts in His final instructions to His disciples respecting their life work—and therefore our life work. According to Luke and Mark he told them to preach repentance and remission of sins among all nations, and to preach the Gospel to the whole creation. (Luke 24. 47; Mark 16. 15). According to Matthew He also told them to teach all nations, "bidding them observe whatsoever I have commanded you". (Matt. 27. 19).

There is a world of difference between the words "preach" and "teach", and there is no reason to doubt that all three Evangelists' accounts embody part only of what Jesus said to them at His departure, and each injunction was actually spoken separately and in its own setting. We might do well, therefore, to examine more closely than we have done heretofore the differences between these several versions of His parting words.

The word "preach" is from the Greek "*evangeliso*", meaning "I tell good news", or from "*kerusso*", which means "I proclaim as a herald". "Teach", on the other hand, is from "*matheteuo*", which denotes the instruction of pupils or learners, the making of disciples. In the Christian way preaching comes first and is followed by teaching. The Apostles at Pentecost first proclaimed good news and went about as heralds, announcing the Kingdom of Heaven, and then settled down to teach their converts.

In the individual Christian ministry it is likely that the early years are taken up with declaring the message, telling out the good tidings of redemption that is in Christ Jesus. When the experiences of the way, and progress in the faith, has brought maturity of knowledge and character, then the believer can better teach. In general, preaching belongs to youth and teaching to mature age; preaching is the work of the morning but teaching that of the evening.

X X X X X

Happy is the man who finds wisdom, and the man who gets understanding, For the gain from it is better than the gain from silver, and its profit better than gold. She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her. Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honour. Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called happy.

The Lord by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding he established the heavens; by his knowledge the deeps broke forth, and the clouds drop down the dew.

Proverbs 3.13-20

STUDIES IN THE FIRST EPISTLE OF JOHN

Part 26

1 John 5. 9-12

"If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater, for this is the witness of God which he hath testified of his Son. He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself; he that believeth not God hath made him a liar; because he believeth not the record that God gave of his Son. And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son." (vs. 9-11).

We have come to what is virtually the end of John's First Epistle. The three-fold witness of chapter 5, verses 6-8, the Spirit, the water, and the blood, constitute the climax to all his arguments and all his exhortations. There is really nothing more to say after he has invoked those three witnesses. The remainder of this final chapter, from verse 9 onwards, is in the nature of an orderly descent from the mountain-top which he had reached in the earlier part of chapter 5. All the argument, all the exhortation, all the warnings, of the earlier chapters culminate in the Witnesses. The Word Who is life, the life that is light, the light that banishes darkness, of chapter 1, all are illuminated once and for all by the Witnesses. The darkness that is sin, the sin that is death, of chapter 2, are condemned once and for all by the Witnesses. The love *for* God and love for fellow that leads eventually *into* the love of God, of chapter 3, are inspired by the Witnesses. The whole of John's Epistle leads up to this theme, that of the three Witnesses to the one central and all-embracing fact of Jesus' Messiahship. When John has led us to that point he has achieved the aim and object of his Epistle. His work is done and he has but to round off the discourse with words that both sum up in brief what he has already said and lead us gently back into the commonplaces of daily life. Our period of sojourn with him on these lofty themes is ended and we are about to step outside the golden sanctuary. In so doing he reminds us that if we are prepared to receive the reliable testimony of men as to the Messiahship of Jesus—as many did in John's own day from those who had known the Lord in the flesh—we must acknowledge that the testimony of God is infinitely more reliable and convincing and we should be correspondingly the more ready to receive and accept it. The Revised Version has it "The witness of God is this, that he hath borne witness of his Son". The very fact that God has borne witness, as He did do at the Annunciation, at Jordan, at Calvary, and above all at Pentecost, should be sufficient for each one of us. "God, who at sundry times and in diverse manners spake in times past unto the fathers by the prophets hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son." (Heb. 1. 1), The witness of God concerning Christ is given to us through Christ! Is that what Jesus meant when

He said (John 8. 17-18) "It is also written in your law, that the testimony of two men is true. I am one that bear witness of myself, and the Father that sent me beareth witness of me". That mystic oneness which subsists between the Father and the Son and which, define or explain it how we will, is ever too deep and profound for us to understand utterly, is manifested in this witness as in so many other aspects of our Lord's revelation of the Father to the sight of men.

It is quite a natural consequence of this understanding that leads John to tell us next that the one who truly believes in the Son of God has the witness within himself. If believing were merely an intellectual exercise of the mind that statement would not necessarily be true. It is because believing on Christ—or "into" Christ, as some would have it—is an affair of the heart as well as of the mind that immediate results follow the act of believing. Justification by faith is the immediate consequence; the entry of a new power into the life that at once commences a transforming work. "If any man be in Christ, there is a new creation; old things are passed away; behold, all things become new". (2 Cor. 5. 17). It is the realisation that such a change has taken place that constitutes the inward witness. No one can truly come into Christ and realise the grace that has filled his life without knowing also that he has this witness within himself, that Jesus is indeed the Son of God. In like manner the Roman centurion, beholding with affrighted eyes the signs and portents that accompanied the tragedy of Calvary, looked up into the heavens and cried aloud his involuntary testimony "Truly this man was the Son of God". So must all who have experienced the power of the risen Christ coming into their hearts and lives make the same confession, a declaration to their own selves and to others that by the power of Jesus of Nazareth they now stand whole and entire in the grace of God.

And he that believeth not? John has a word to say about him also; but it is the same word that he has elaborated so much previously in the Epistle. He hath made God a liar! The evidence is so clear and plain, the power of the Spirit so manifest, that for one who has received it to throw it back is tantamount to giving the lie to God. It comes to this, says John, that God has given to us eternal life, and the evidence of that gift is manifest and overwhelming, and here is a man who sees this wonderful thing and refuses to admit that it is so. And because he will not believe, it is impossible that he share in the precious gift; and because he does not share in the gift he has no witness within his own self as to its truth. So again it all comes back to the old question of belief or unbelief. There was the evidence, brought back on the shoulders of twelve strong men; the fruits of the land, fruits such as Israel had never seen before, fruits that bore out in every detail and to the full what God had told them concerning the land toward which they journeyed. But still they

disbelieved; could not bring themselves to think they could ever win the land for themselves, even although God had told them they had but to march forward and all opposition would melt away. And so they never did enter in, "because of unbelief". So it must ever be with all who approach the sacred things. They are there to be grasped, and once grasped the evidence of their reality is inherent; but without that primary belief which is faith they cannot even be grasped.

So verse 12 becomes both a summing up of what has gone before and an enunciation of a great law in the fabric of God's dealings with those who would come to Him, one might say, the great law, for it enshrines the most important truth of all. "He that hath the Son hath life, and he that hath not the Son hath not life."

That text has been used in the past to separate the sheep from the goats and point the respective pathways to Heaven and Hell. It does not have anything to do with that subject at all. It has nothing to do with the final judgment on the world of men—except as an expression of a principle which will always be valid. John is here speaking only of the Church of this Age, the "footstep followers" of Jesus, who have set their hands to the plough, including those who, in the Lord's expression, "look back" and hence are "not fit for the Kingdom of God". (Luke 9. 62). It is of these, probationary members of the Millennial Age "Royal Priesthood", he says, only those who "have the Son" are possessors of the eternal life that ensures their entrance into the everlasting Kingdom. Some there are who, like those in the parable, will claim to have eaten and drunk in His presence and to have listened to His voice in their midst and yet to whom He declares "I never knew you; depart from me". How evident it is that this whole matter is one of the heart's utter and unreserved dedication to God, without condition and without stipulation, like Isaiah "Here am I—send me"; or the Psalmist "Lo I come, to do Thy Will, O God".

So the high song of exultation is partnered with a solemn note of warning. The lofty mountain peak reaching up so near to God, serves also to reveal the dark and deep chasm beneath. We can attain to the highest salvation in this wonderful power that is given to us—we can find ourselves thrust down to the sides of the pit. John's very next words reveal his confidence that those to whom he writes will not thus make ship-wreck of their faith; he does not fear that his brethren and friends themselves stand in so perilous a position, but he recounts these truths that they may be reminded of the things from which they have so clearly escaped, and may be inspired to hold fast to their faith that they fall not after other men's examples of unbelief.

AOH

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Wanting no good thing . .

Psalm 34.10 says: "They that seek the Lord shall not want any good thing." Though the good thing intended here is what is spoken of in verse 22, "none shall be desolated," or in John 14. 23, "If a man love me, he will keep my words; and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him"—for this is a good thing indeed—yet that which most readily comes to the mind in reading these words is some earthly good thing which we may desire. We think of some who are greatly burdened with trials and difficulties, and seem to have far more than their share of illness and suffering, and it might be hard to realise these were "not in want of any good thing".

Though this is not easy to explain by cold logic, yet the testimony of the poorest and most destitute brother or sister in Christ is: "I have wanted no good thing". The following, by Alexander Peden, dated 1682, surely explains this position:— "I remember, as I came through the country, that there was a poor widow woman, whose husband fell at Bothwell. The callous soldiers came to plunder her house, telling her they would take all she had: 'we will leave thee nothing,' said they, 'either to put in thee or on thee.' 'I care not', said she, 'I will not want as long as God is in the Heavens'."

Fruit of Evil

It has been suggested that it is quite within the power of an individual devoted to evil for its own sake to *destroy his own capacity for repentance*. Food for thought here! On the one hand, we hold firmly to the principle that whilst there is the least hope of the sinner turning from the error of his way, whilst there is anything at all left upon which Divine Love can work, God will not let go his hold on the erring one. Upon the other hand, Scripture is clear that there are circumstances in which it is impossible to renew a man to repentance, that for some there is reserved the "blackness of darkness for ever". There is hope of a tree, says Job, if it be cut down, that through the scent of water it will bud and become green again; that is because the life principle has not become altogether extinct in the stump and roots. A plant may wither and dry up in the scorching heat, and while life remains in it, rain will bring it renewed vigour, but if the life has gone, nothing can ever restore it.

May we then conclude that there is something in man, a capacity for

appreciating the things of righteousness in goodness and purity, implanted there by God at the beginning, which can be smothered over, but need not be entirely obliterated in even the most degraded of men; but that continued obstinate hardening of the heart against every good influence in the favourable environment of the Millennial Age can utterly destroy that capacity and leave nothing of the man but an empty physical frame possessing the spirit of life but no preserving influence of good; and that the workings of sin in that physical body will eventually encompass its destruction without hope recovery? Thus seen, the "Second Death" is the inevitable result of a man's deliberate stifling of the powers of righteousness which God implanted within him. *"It shall come to pass, that every soul which will not hear that Prophet shall be cut off from among the people."*

QUIZ ANSWERS

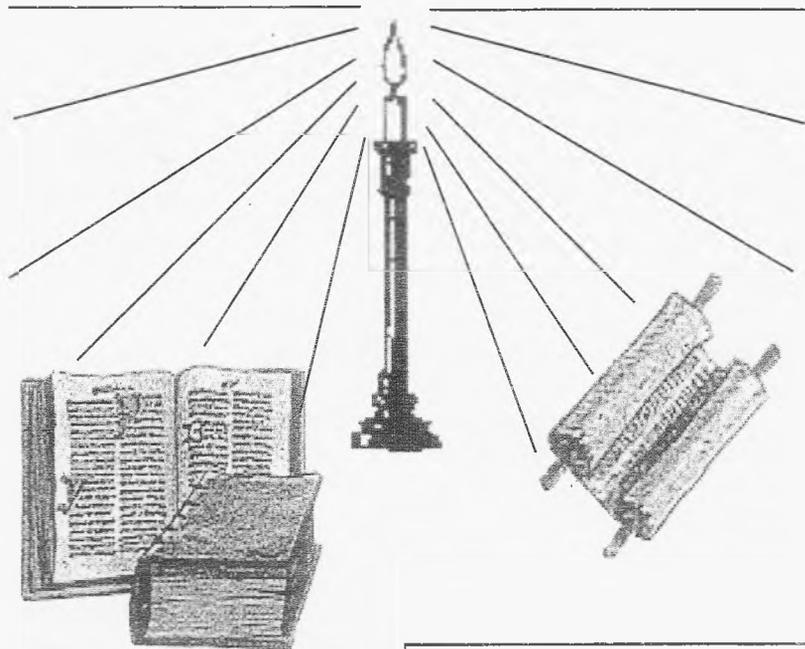
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|------------|-----------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| 1. Peter | Matthew 4.18 | 2. Leah | Genesis 29.16 |
| 3. Agag | 1 Samuel 15.33 | 4. Apollos | 1 Corinthians 3.6 |
| 5. Naboth | 1 Kings 21.1 | 6. Zacchaeus | Luke 19.2 |
| 7. Ananias | Acts 5.1 | 8. Crispus | Acts 18.8 |
| 9. Luke | Colossians 4.14 | 10. Bartimaeus | Mark 10.46 |
| 11. Sarah | Genesis 17.15 | 12. Melchizedec | Genesis 14.18 |
| 13. Sisera | Judges 4.22 | 14. Tabitha | Acts 9.40 |
| 15. Mahlon | Ruth 1.2 | 16. Gomer | Hosea 1.3 |
| 17. Job | Job 1.9 | 18. Eutychus | Acts 20.9 |
| 19. Julius | Acts 27.3 | 20. Lois | 2 Timothy 1.5 |

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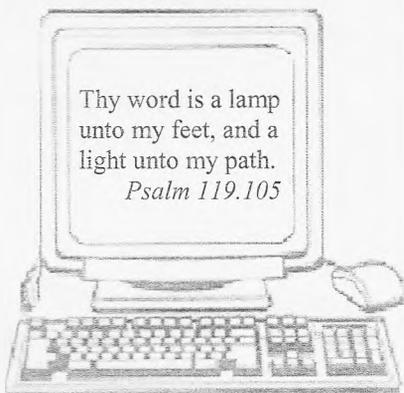
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Thy word is a lamp
unto my feet, and a
light unto my path.

Psalm 119.105



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BIBLE STUDY MONTHLY

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The Bible Study Monthly is published to promote knowledge of the Bible. It sees the Scriptures as a true record of God's dealings with the human race, needing to be understood in our generation. It looks for the advent of our Lord, and His reign of peace and justice on the earth.

"Speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into Him who is the head, into Christ" (Ephesians 4:15 NRSV)

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GOD'S ENERGY

A workman who is energetic will gather together his materials, shape them, place them, fit them together, and in a surprisingly short time a building is complete. Because he lives in the modern age his work is the more effective because he draws upon the modern source of energy for his tools, electricity. Instead of hammering he drives in a screw, instead of chipping away to create a cavity, he drills a hole in seconds, instead of a laborious handsaw his circular saw slices through the timber as if it were butter. The energy of the man combined with the energy supply at his disposal makes for effective work.

Our word 'energy' derives from the Greek words *en ergon*, meaning 'at work'. The Greeks combined the two in the noun *energeia*, the verb *energein* and the adjective *energos* (*energes*). These are used in the Scriptures, but scholars have noted their use in earlier times to describe different things. Think of a medicine *that works*; of surgery that *gets to the cause* of a problem. Think of a battering ram that *beats down city gates*; of a magistrate who is *active in performing his duties*; of land which is *productive*; of a mill *in working order*. In the Septuagint, it speaks of a day which is not the Sabbath but a *working day*. Think of a person who does not just think good thoughts but *puts them into action*. '*Energeia* is not a man's potential action, it is his actual action. It is the demonstration of inner character in deeds. It is goodness plus efficiency.... focussed, purposeful, meaningful, effective, energetic action' (Barclay).

So the apostle Paul comes to speak of God's *energeia*.

The supreme example he gives of God's energy is in the resurrection of Christ, "*the working of his great might which he accomplished in Christ when he raised him from the dead...*" (Ephesians 1.19,20). His exercise of power did not stop at Jesus becoming alive rather than dead (though this in itself is startling enough). He made him "*sit at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name which is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come; and he has put all things under his feet and has made him head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fulness of him who fills all in all*" (vv.20-23).

God's astonishing power is also at work in the Christian believer, if he or she can but realise it. It is "*the immeasurable greatness of his power in us who believe*" (v.9). It is energy bringing about the effective call of all who believe. They are brought into their inheritance, into the company of 'saints', who were chosen as part of a plan before divine energy created the world. This energy is working in each individual.

In Christ we have come to full life. Our baptism is a picture of a death and a resurrection, a death to the old life - 'buried with him in baptism' - and then being 'raised with him' to the new life. But it is more than just a picture, it involves faith in God's energy. His effective action which was shown in Christ's resurrection is now active in our new lives. We are 'made alive' together with Christ Jesus: infringements of God's law are all forgiven, legal requirements are set aside because of the Cross (Colossians 2.10-14)).

Beyond this, our hopes for a future life also depend on God's energy. As citizens of heaven resident on earth we are waiting, still, for our Saviour. We expect him to change our present bodies to become like his body, which is glorious. How? By His energy which gives him control over everything.

Paul experienced this energy as he preached and taught. He had been made a minister, startlingly, on the Damascus road, but also continually by God's grace working in his life before and after that event. In this he was conscious of the energy, the effective working of His power. Paul understood this as being part of God's whole scheme of things. It was his task to tell all races of the limitless riches to be found in Christ. He had to help men realise that the Creator's previously hidden purpose was to establish a community, the church, which would be evidence of his eternal intentions (Ephesians 3.7ff). For each individual this should involve the strength of the Spirit in one's inner being; Christ 'dwelling' in their hearts because they believed in him; with love as their foundation and the source of their ability to grow; and having an awareness of God and Christ which goes beyond anything one can be told or mentally understand. This came about through His power

energising them.

This was the divine strategy in which Paul was playing his part (Colossians 1.24-29). His work was not just proclamation, it was personal pastoral care for each convert - with warnings, wise teaching and advice, so that each one might become 'mature in Christ'. *"For this I toil, striving with all the energy which he mightily inspires within me."*

In Paul's lifetime the community began to grow, with congregations scattered over all the world. They looked to their leaders, who like Paul might be imprisoned. Each group was made up of individuals who might not necessarily get on well with one another. So Paul wrote to the churches at Ephesus and the surrounding area, urging them to live in a way that was appropriate to God's calling effective within them. They should restrain their personal urges, drives and ambitions, but be eager, on the other hand, to 'maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace'. Within this unity God's gifts were given to individuals, and the use of the gifts was for the benefit and service of all. The result must be growth. The picture Paul gives is Christ as the head of a body, each individual as a part of it, all linked together, growing together... with purposeful effective energy (Ephesians 4.16).

It is the same in our day, nearly two thousand years on. As believers, are we expected to be energetic? Should we take as our model the workman who gets things done? Some might find this hard, for not everyone is physically fit or mentally agile. It might be better to take as our model the power tool in the workman's hand. The tool uses the energy which is given to it, supplied by battery or cable, and it responds to control. So it must be God's energy which we look for, which is not the same thing as our own physical or mental energies. If we are naturally energetic people, we can be thankful, and use our energies as God guides us. Yet if our own energy is small, we might be like a tool which perhaps is used only once, but does what it was designed for, responsive to an energy and control beyond itself. It has been said that 'the glory of the Christian life is that it is the life which is clothed with the *energeia*, the energy, the effective power of God himself'.

GC

FOUR PICTURES

The Apostle Peter's words in 1 Peter 2.1-5 contain four distinct pictures of the new life in Christ. The idea of this new life was introduced by the Apostle in the previous chapter, verses 3 and 23, where he says that we were *"born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus"* and *"born again.... through the Word of God"*.

The pictures are progressive, the first dealing with the laying aside of the things belonging to the old life, like discarded clothing, the second the individual growth and development of the new life, the third dealing with our corporate life in Christ and the fourth with our mission of service and sacrifice.

The first picture deals with our attitude to the old life. Peter exhorts, *"So put away all malice and all guile and insincerity and envy and all slander"* Peter exhorts. This is one of the many indications in his epistles that Peter was acquainted with the writings of Paul, for the same figure is used in Ephesians and Colossians, where Paul speaks of our attitude to the old life as being like the discarding of old and unworthy garments. *"Put off"* Paul says *"your old nature which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful lusts.... And put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness."* The Bible likens man's own righteousness to "filthy rags" and points to the provision made in Christ for a complete change. It speaks of the "robe of righteousness", the "garments of salvation" and such things to put on as mercies, kindness, humility of mind, meekness, patience and long suffering. Accepting God's provision in Christ, we may wear, instead of malice, goodwill; instead of guile and hypocrisy, simplicity and sincerity; instead of envy, generosity of spirit; evil speaking will be discarded for speech that is helpful for building others up, ministering grace to the hearers. Of all these evils, evil speaking is perhaps the one to which we are most prone. Let us remember *"We none of us know one another, and oft into error we fall; then let us speak well of each other or speak not of others at all"*.

The second picture deals, not with the discarding of the old life, but with the development of the new. *"Like new born babes, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up to salvation; for you have tasted the kindness of the Lord"*. Those to whom Peter wrote were probably young in the faith, but the principle is applicable to all stages of Christian growth and development. As Nature has provided, in the mother, natural food for the child, so God has provided in Christ spiritual sustenance for the believer. The infant craves for its natural food and finds in it not only what satisfies its felt needs but also that which makes possible growth and development. In the

same way the spirit-begotten child of God longs for what can only be found in Christ. He may try to satisfy his longings with other things, philosophies, creeds, doctrines, or perhaps with worldly things, but life's experiences will eventually bring him to the point where he will cry *"I've tried the broken cisterns, Lord, but ah, their waters failed! None but Christ can satisfy, none other name for me"*. Only in complete dependence on the Lord, as the child on the mother, can the Christian find satisfaction and the means of growth and development. This utter dependence on him was illustrated in our Lord's parable of the Vine and the branches; *"Apart from me ye can do nothing"*.

Since they had tasted, that is, had an experience in their lives, of the grace of God, they should desire to increase more and more in knowledge and love of him. The fullest possible experience of the love of Christ which any child of God can enjoy here below is only a taste as compared with what will be revealed. *"Oh Christ, He is the fountain, the deep sweet well of love; the streams of earth I've tasted, more deep I'll drink above. There to an ocean's fullness his mercy doth expand "*

We come to the third picture. While each child of God must grow and develop as a separate and distinct personality, as an individual branch in the vine, he nevertheless has a relationship to maintain with his brethren in Christ. The third picture shows this corporate life which we enjoy as parts of one whole. *"Come to him, that living stone, rejected by men but in God's sight chosen and precious, and like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house"*. Peter's name must have been to him a perpetual reminder that he was a living stone. Peter seems to see in it an illustration of what is true of all the elect of God, for all are called to be living stones. He was one of many stones necessary to the building of the church of God. Unlike Peter, we do not get a new natural name when we come to the Lord, nor do we occupy the same position of importance in the temple of God. Nevertheless like him we are called to be living stones.

"Come to him"; in his use of this expression Peter was probably reflecting on that never-to-be forgotten first meeting with the Lord when he received the new name. In the same way we often look back to the time when we first came to God in the fullness of our self surrender. Perhaps the Lord gave us a new name then in conformity with our characteristics, a new name which will be confirmed and revealed when as overcomers we receive the symbolic white stone upon which it is recorded (Rev.2.17).

A heap of stones is not a building, but the master builder sees how it is possible for these stones to be made into a house and how the various shapes and sizes can be best utilised. Coming to the master builder of the spiritual house we undergo his scrutiny as Peter did. He notes our shape and size and texture and assigns us a place in his spiritual temple. Although not all are

prominent like Peter, every stone, even the humblest, is necessary and is an object of the same painstaking care on the part of the master builder.

It was in connection with Peter's great confession of Jesus as the Christ that the Lord for the first time foretold his coming suffering and death. This may have been in Peter's mind when He said "*rejected by men but in God's sight chosen and precious*". The Lord is still rejected and by the world disowned and his true church shares in his rejection. It will not be long before the stone which the builders rejected will be made the headstone of the corner, and the church, glorified with her Lord, will constitute the tabernacle of God amongst men when He shall be their God and they shall be his people.

The fourth and last picture is that of the priesthood. "*A holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God through Jesus Christ*". It must have been difficult for Peter and the early Jewish believers to appreciate what was about to replace the ceremonial features of the Law which were still being enacted in their day. At the very centre of their religious and national life was the temple with its priesthood. Morning by morning and evening by evening the priests offered the daily sacrifices on the altar in the court and burned incense on the golden altar in the Holy. Not anyone could be a priest; only those who were called of God through their descent from the family of Aaron. Only this specially favoured group could offer sacrifices acceptable to God. Only they could go into the Holy and Most Holy. In these circumstances it was natural that the priesthood should be an object of the deepest veneration and respect. It was not easy for the early Jewish disciples to grasp the thought that followers of the Lord are the true priests. What sacrifices are they qualified to offer that are acceptable to God through Jesus Christ? What are the Holy places to which they only have the right of entrance?

Their sacrifices consist not of the animals ordained in the Law but their full self surrender to the will of God. "*I beseech you therefore, brethren,*" Paul says, "*by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service*". "*By him therefore*" he says again "*let us offer to God the sacrifice of praise continually, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to his name*". This implies more than lip service to God. It means the same as "*in everything give thanks*" and implies a life so surrendered to the will of God that all of life's experiences, like the incense coming into contact with the fire, pleasing or painful, dark or bright, will yield a sweet fragrance of loving submission thankfulness and praise to God. May that thought stimulate us to renewed zeal as members of the Holy Priesthood in offering those sacrifices which are acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

CTW, revised

A VOICE FROM THE CATACOMBS

The pagans of Rome often remarked on the strange living hope which transformed the lives of those from among their number who became converts to Christianity. Nowhere is this contrast between the living faith that is Christianity, and the dark despair that characterised paganism, more marked than in the epitaphs set up by pagan and Christian over their dead.

The Christian sentiments, of which many examples are found in the Catacombs at Rome, breath a spirit of calm and even joyous confidence for the future. The pagan epitaphs reveal utter hopelessness and resentment against a fate which offered them no recompense for the trials and vicissitudes of life.

Here are a few examples, from times between the year A.D. 74 and the seventh century.

*Petronia, a Deacon's Wife.
The Type of Modesty.
In this place I lay my bones.
Spare your tears, dear Husband and Daughters,
and Believe that it is forbidden To Weep
for One Who Lives in God.
Buried in Peace on the Third Before the Nones of October
in the Consulate of Festus.*

Another one, much more brief, but how eloquent—

*Victorina,
In Peace,
and in Christ.*

Against this, read a pagan epitaph, brief in its tragedy of a pagan father who has lost a well-beloved daughter, without hope of reunion:

*I, Procope, Lift Up My Hands
Against God, Who Snatched Me Away Innocent.
She Lived Twenty Years. Proclus Set Up This.*

Not so the Christians who set this brief word on the stone of a pilgrim who had reached the end of the way,

The Dormitory of Elpis.

To us a dormitory is a sleeping-place. To the early Christians the grave was but a dormitory. Our own word "cemetery" is the Greek "*koimeterion*", meaning the same as "dormitory", a place of sleep. *Elpis* is the Greek for 'hope'. So two loving Christian parents, many centuries ago, laid their child to rest in a grave far below the streets of Rome and inscribed upon her stone—

*Here Sleeps Porcella in Peace,
She Lived
3 Years 10 Months 13 Days.*

That peace was denied the sorrowing mother who knew nothing but the hopeless creed of paganism, and poured out her heart's anguish in these bitter words—

*Caius Julius Maximus
Aged 11 Years 5 Months
O Relentless Fortune
Who Delightest in Cruel Death.
Why is Maximus So Suddenly Snatched From Me?
He Who Used to Lie Joyfully On My Bosom.
This Stone Now Marks His Tomb.
Behold His Mother.*

How different is the affectionate remembrance and calm submission of these parents, believers in Christ, who inscribed—

*Navarina.
In Peace.
A Sweet Soul,
Who Lived 16 Years and 5 Months.
A Soul As Sweet As Honey.
This Epitaph Was Made by Her Parents.*

Peace, peace : that is the constant refrain of these rejoicing believers as they laid their loved ones to rest. This last example is perhaps the record of a Christian matron, well spoken of for good works and labours of love in the service of the brethren.

*Constantia,
Buried in Peace
On The Lord's Day The Sixth Before The Kalends of July
In The Fifth Consulate of Honorius Augustus
To The Well-Deserving;
In Peace.*

How well these brethren of ours must have learned the truth contained in Paul's triumphant words: "So then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" Truly, we who follow in their steps are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, men and women, who, in their lives and deaths, manifested the reality of that faith which was in them.

"IN THE DAYS OF THESE KINGS"

Setting up the Kingdom

"And in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed, and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever." (Dan. 2. 44).

The dream of the great image and the prophet Daniel's interpretation, as recorded in the second chapter of Daniel, is very familiar to all students of Bible prophecy. This forty-fourth verse is the focal point of the prophecy; the stone cut out of the mountain which first struck the feet of the image and reduced the whole structure to powder, and afterwards became a great mountain that filled the whole earth, is a symbol of the Kingdom of God which first destroys all man-made systems of government and then takes their place as the long-promised earthly kingdom of Messiah under whose beneficent reign the power of evil is finally to be broken and all nations of the earth be blessed.

There is one element in this verse which is sometimes the cause of misunderstanding. "In the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom" were the words of Daniel, inspired, we may be sure, by the Holy Spirit and therefore words whose veracity and importance cannot be minimised. On the basis of this expression it has been argued by some that before the present age comes to its end, and whilst the great powers of earth pictured by the four metals of the image are still in active operation, the Kingdom of the next Age will be established in power, in some sense, so that it may be truly said that the Kingdom has been set up and the work of Christ begun while as yet the Kingdoms of this world retain their own power. Since it is perfectly evident that the Millennial kingdom has not been established in an outwardly and physically manifest sense and that Satan is still without any doubt the god of this world the suggestion is made that the Kingdom is set in power "in the heavens"—the sphere of spiritual control of the earth, and that this meets the requirements of the statement in Dan. 2. 44.

This short note will endeavour to put forward a much more logical and easy-to-grasp explanation. Let it be noted that Daniel did not say the kingdom would be set up in Millennial splendour and power "in the days of these kings"; only that it would be "set up". In the vision itself the stone did not become a great mountain which filled the whole earth until after it had overthrown the image and scattered the residue until nothing of it was left. The Book of Revelation makes it clear that the enemies of the kingdom must be overthrown before the reign of the saints can commence, and the whole of the New Testament bears confirmatory witness. There is no sense in which the

Church reigns in glory and power whilst still in the flesh, and it is unthinkable to conceive our Lord commencing His reign without His bride by His side. The 'wedding feast' must precede the shining forth of the saints in the Kingdom of their Father.

The key to Daniel's words lies in Matt. 12. 28 *"If I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the Kingdom of God is come unto you"* and even more definitely in Luke 16. 16 *"The law and the prophets were until John; since that time the Kingdom of God is preached, and every man presseth into it"*. The Kingdom is dual in its nature; it has an earthly aspect and a spiritual aspect. The earthly aspect is not yet established; it will be so when the Second Advent of our Lord Jesus Christ has reached that phase in which it is openly manifest to all men and the rulership of the world has passed into the hands of His representatives. The spiritual aspect commenced at the First Advent, with the preaching of the Kingdom and the bringing of *"life and immortality to light through the gospel"* which was characteristic of that Advent.

The more spectacular establishment of the earthly Kingdom at the end of the Gospel Age has tended to overshadow the no less important—in fact much more important—introduction of the spiritual aspect of the Kingdom at the beginning of the Age. The burden of the message preached by Jesus and the Apostles was *"Repent—for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand"*. Those who heard and responded were urged to come into the Kingdom there and then. The Apostle Paul in Col. 1. 13 plainly declares that we who are the Lord's consecrated followers have already been delivered from the power of darkness and translated into the kingdom of God's Son. When the Pharisees in Luke 17. 21 demanded of Jesus a statement on when the Kingdom of God should come—and the kingdom they looked for was of course an outwardly manifest Kingdom of Israel in power over the nations—He told them that the Kingdom was not coming in an outwardly perceptible fashion; men would not point here, or there, to show their fellows the Kingdom in power, for, said Jesus, *"the Kingdom of God is within you"*. What Jesus meant the Pharisees to understand is clearly that in their looking for the Kingdom they were not to expect, then, an outward Kingdom but an inward one, in their own hearts and lives. It was their failure to appreciate His meaning which led them to miss the opportunity for which their whole nation had been trained during the previous fourteen hundred years.

When therefore the writer to the Hebrews exhorts us *"... wherefore we, receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace whereby we may serve God acceptably"* (Heb. 12. 28), he refers to a Kingdom which was a real thing even although it existed as yet only among the believers and in their hearts. Entrance into the "Covenant by sacrifice" has been entrance into the Kingdom. The Kingdom of God has truly been "set up" "in the days of

these kings" in the sense that God has called into His Covenant a body of men and women, the consecrated followers of Christ from Pentecost until now, who have been delivered from the power and authority of the god of this world and constituted members of the Kingdom of Heaven. It is true that each such disciple is in the position of being a kind of advance outpost of the new Kingdom in enemy territory, for we live our lives still in the midst of a world system which is opposed to the things for which we stand and with which we have little in common. But the work of the Kingdom is going on, in the hearts of those whom Jesus called "the children of the Kingdom".

AOH

THE SIEGE OF JERUSALEM

One of the great, dramatic escapes of Jerusalem was the encounter with Sennacherib in 701 B.C. In those days the Western part of Asia was in a tremendous state of upheaval. Assyria was mighty, and the smaller nations lived in fear and trembling, never knowing which of them would be savagely attacked and devastated by her next.

The land of Judah had suffered several attacks from nearby Edomite people and as a result Judah's king had done a terribly naïve thing. He had appealed for help to the great tyrant, Assyria. So Assyria took Judah under her wing, but it was a wing of treachery. She took Judah's wealth, made Judah a subject nation, set up pagan worship in Judah's cities, and then left her unprotected from local enemies.

Judah, with Jerusalem her capital, was down. Her prosperity, peace and freedom had gone. And all this misery and folly had really come about because of a succession of godless Kings, and because the people had thrown aside their respect and service to the Lord.

Then King Hezekiah came on to the scene. At twenty-five years of age Hezekiah took over the helm of the 'puppet' government which ruled Judah as a satellite of Assyria. Here was the man for the hour. There was no one to approach him among all the kings of Judah before or since. Hezekiah probably served as joint-king with Ahaz for thirteen years, and in those early years of power he saw terrible things happen. The land of Israel, immediately north of Judah, was invaded by Assyria. For three years the capital city was besieged and then it fell. The Assyrians struck without mercy and drove the people in their thousands to slavery in Persia. Hezekiah knew that these people of Israel had lost the care and protection of God because they had rejected Him and

scorned Him. The young king was determined to change things for the people of Judah. For many years the great Temple of Jerusalem had been closed and the services abandoned. The giant doors on the porch hung in decay. Inside, lumber had been dumped and dust and dirt covered everything. Hezekiah ordered the immediate cleaning and restoration of the Temple. Then he stirred the priests into action and urged a total reconsecration of everyone to the Lord.

He sent messengers along the hot, dusty highways of Judah to every town and village to evangelise the people, "Serve the Lord," was the call, "for the Lord is gracious and compassionate and will not turn away his face from you if you return to Him." He even sent messengers across the border to Israel saying, "Don't be like your fathers or brothers who transgressed against the Lord...for as you can see, He turned them over to desolation." The vast majority of people left in Israel made fun of the messengers and ridiculed them, but in Judah, the people humbled themselves before God as one body, and vast numbers of them travelled to Jerusalem for a truly amazing Passover.

Once again Judah was trusting in the Lord and seeing great blessings as a result. So Hezekiah repudiated the authority of Assyria over his land. This was rebellion. From that moment, Hezekiah became a marked man, high on the list for punishment.

Meanwhile, the king who was to be Hezekiah's most terrifying enemy ascended the Assyrian throne. King Sennacherib became outright King of Assyria in 705 B.C. and he soon established himself as a deadly expert in the science of warfare. His records, chipped out of stone prisms, have been recovered from the ruins of his great palace at Nineveh, and are solid evidence for the Biblical narrative. In them he makes no secret of his opinion about himself.

He calls himself "Sennacherib, the great King, the mighty King, the King of the Universe, favourite of the great gods, perfect hero, mighty man . . . the wise ruler, lover of justice." In another place this great lover of justice describes how he dealt with a rebel king. "The warriors I cut down with the sword, not one escaped . . . the corpses of his warriors I hung on stakes surrounding the city."

Sennacherib was, in fact, an evil, high-handed bully whose incredible conceit was only exceeded by his ability to massacre people in their thousands. The extension of his kingdom was his main interest, and when he conquered, he drove countless fatherless families back to Nineveh to become slaves in the building of his great palace. His wallpaper consisted of huge pictures of his victories cut out of slabs of stone and now to be seen in the "Nineveh Gallery" of the British Museum. No one can look at these slabs of stone and doubt the reality of the Biblical history.

As the years went by Sennacherib gained momentum at the head of his armies. He would deal with some rebels, and then some new challenge would present itself and he would launch out into fresh aggression. Sennacherib became one of the most successful commanders ever. Assyrian kings had never managed to defeat certain tribes in Persia. But Sennacherib was a brilliant and ruthless general, and he conquered where others had failed. "I destroyed, I devastated, I turned into ruins, and their houses I set on fire."

He marked all his records "Sennacherib – 'King of all the Universe'" and he meant it. He certainly meant to deal with all those people who had dared to rebel against him. The programme was arranged.

Firstly, Sennacherib disciplined Babylon. Then he turned his attention to Tyre, only 110 miles north of Jerusalem. His fury and military power struck the King of Tyre hard, and Sennacherib boasted on records of stone. "The terrifying splendour of my sovereignty overcame him and far off into the midst of the sea he fled."

Who was next? The great army turned south. Southward they marched heading for Samaria, and then . . . Jerusalem. In their path rebels were crushed. The obedient subjects went trembling to him with numerous presents and great sums of money. They bowed down to him and kissed his feet. There could be no resistance to Sennacherib. He was the invincible King of the Universe.

Finally, when Hezekiah was in his fourteenth year as King, Sennacherib arrived in the land of Judah and began his operations.

The valleys of Judah filled with chariots and horsemen, and the numerous walled cities that formed the protection of Judah were besieged and taken by Sennacherib one by one. Hezekiah hardly knew what to do. The defences of Jerusalem were in a hopeless state. The walls were full of gaps, all the foreigners in the army had become terrified and deserted and it was too late for Hezekiah to help the smaller cities.

It wasn't long before Sennacherib arrived in Lachish and surrounded it with his entire Imperial Force. Lachish was a strongly fortified town only twenty-five miles south-west of Jerusalem. It commanded a position over the road from Egypt, and this may have been why Sennacherib besieged it. If so, it was perfect military strategy. If Jerusalem had by any chance hoped for help from Egypt, they were now cut off.

Hezekiah in a moment of panic, tried to make a settlement. It was a long shot but he thought it was worth a try. He sent out a messenger to Lachish with this message: "I have offended you and done wrong. If you will withdraw from me I will bear whatever you demand from me." Sennacherib replied demanding a tremendous sum of money in silver and gold. Hezekiah struggled to pay. He took all the money in the Temple as well as his personal

treasury. But he realised that the Assyrians would never honour their bargain. So while Sennacherib besieged Lachish, Hezekiah sprang into action at Jerusalem.

Hezekiah called together his rulers and fighting commanders and they made their plans. Where the walls of the city were broken down they rebuilt them. So urgent was the work that houses were knocked down to get brick. Hundreds of men worked feverishly to extend the wall "along the South East Hill to shield the new suburbs of the city". Again archaeologists can confirm the Biblical record to the hilt. The new wall was double, with a middle-moat thirty-eight feet wide. It can be seen today and research has established that it was definitely built in King Hezekiah's time.

Inside the City there was a special stronghold built by king David three hundred years before and called 'The Millo'. This was now reinforced and probably became the headquarters of those officers who were building up a good supply of weapons and shields.

But the crowning masterpiece of all Hezekiah's defensive measures was his tunnel. The two main sources of water for the city were situated outside. Hezekiah guaranteed a constant, secret supply of water inside the City by blocking up the ground level outlet of the Gihon Spring (The Virgin's Well) and diverting the water deep down into a new tunnel running through solid rock under the west side of the City. The tunnel was brought into a pool inside the City called the Pool of Siloam. This tunnel is amazing evidence for the Biblical record. It is one of the tourist attractions in Jerusalem today, and water still flows through it to the Pool of Siloam. Hezekiah's workmen produced a tunnel a quarter of a mile long and four-and-a-half feet high. The miners started working at opposite ends and met in the middle.

One last minute panic measure remained to be carried out. The Kedron Brook and all the remaining water sources needed to be blocked up. A great number of people went to work, hurried along by their commanders who said "Why should the Kings of Assyria come and find good water supplies?" Most of these places have since been excavated and found to be full of large stones and mortar obviously put in very hastily.

God's people were facing tremendous odds and they were stirred to work as never before. What a testimony against the tendency to lie still in the face of difficulties. Like the great host of true men of faith Hezekiah trusted in God, and acted. Combat Commanders were appointed and a massive briefing meeting was held just inside the City gates. Hezekiah addressed the people.

"Be strong, stand firm. Do not be afraid or disheartened because of the King of Assyria or because of all his forces, for there are more with us than with him. With him is an arm of flesh – but with us is the Lord our God to

help us and fight our wars for us.”

Before very long Sennacherib made his next move. While his main forces continued the siege at Lachish, he sent three senior officials with a large force to Jerusalem, and when they arrived they assembled on the road to the Fuller's Field on the south side of the City. At the head of the force were a Field Marshal, the Chief of Staff, and the head of the Assyrian Treasury.

The Assyrians took stock of the towering City walls. Did they have enough men to overpower Jerusalem? They were only a detachment from the main army. Was Hezekiah so weak that a mere show of power would bring about his surrender? After a while the officers signalled to the City asking for representatives to come out to them. Three Judean officials went out.

The Assyrians were very cunning diplomats. Their officers spoke several languages fluently and their intelligence service was very effective. Speaking in Hebrew the Chief of Staff gave his message for Hezekiah. Hezekiah had rebelled like a strong man, but as soon as Sennacherib came near he pleaded for mercy and offered money to be pardoned. The Chief of Staff's words were full of scorn.

“What were you trusting in?” he asked. “You think lip service is strength enough for war!” He laughed at the lack of trained soldiers in Jerusalem and he certainly seemed to know that the hired foreign soldiers had deserted.

“Make a wager with my master,” he jeered, “I will certainly give you 2,000 horses if you are capable of finding riders for them. How can you drive away one of the least of my master's soldiers when you depend on Egypt for chariots and horsemen?”

Then the Chief of Staff conveyed the most taunting part of Sennacherib's message to Hezekiah. This was the way, he thought, to speak to these religious people.

“Have I come up against this place to destroy it without the Lord's consent? The Lord said to me: Go up against this land and destroy it.”

When he spoke the three officials from Jerusalem grew increasingly uneasy. This Assyrian Chief of Staff spoke Hebrew, and with a very loud voice. If the Jerusalem people sitting on the wall heard his words it would be all round the City in no time and public morale would collapse.

The situation was very dangerous. Jerusalem had strong defences, but humanly that was all. The great Assyrian army had never been defeated, and Jerusalem didn't have any soldiers for offensive work. How long would Lachish hold out before being crushed by Sennacherib? How long could Jerusalem survive when her turn came?

Sennacherib anticipated an overwhelming victory from the luxury of his camp twenty-five miles away. Hezekiah, “shut up like a caged bird” in

Jerusalem, waited, and prayed.

[We came upon this article among some papers. It had apparently been torn out of the Evangelical Times some fifty years ago and is incomplete. For what happened next we need to go to the Bible. Refer to Isaiah chapters 36 and 37. For the sequel we rely on an account in 'Chronicles—News of the Past'.]

Assyrian Army Flees – Jerusalem Saved!

3 week Siege ends as Sennacherib's Army is struck down by Plague.

The siege of Jerusalem is over. King Sennacherib's once-mighty Assyrian army has been dealt the deadliest blow in all its history: It has been struck down by plague.

Overnight, a swaggering, threatening horde of battle-eager fighting men has been turned into a mass of black-faced corpses. Those who were fortunate enough to escape the disease are fleeing the camp in all haste, taking with them what they can, leaving the rest behind.

King Hezekiah, accompanied by the Prophet Isaiah – whose sublime faith and confidence throughout this crisis are now being recalled – appeared this morning on the wall to proclaim the city's release to the people and to give thanks to the Lord for His timely intervention. The two men were loudly acclaimed by the populace.

Jerusalem's salvation, after three weeks under siege, caught the city by surprise. The first intimation that something had gone drastically wrong in the enemy camp came at dawn this morning, when the Commander of the Northern Watchtower despatched the following message to the Commander-in-Chief:

"Assyrian foot-soldiers retreating rapidly in westerly direction, manner and speed of retreat suggest flight. Several siege machines being taken along. Riderless horses roaming the fields, untended. Awaiting your orders."

Half an hour elapsed before the following reply came back from the Commander-in-Chief, who in the meantime had held a hurried consultation with His Majesty:

"Send patrol to enemy camp immediately to investigate. Take all precautions: Withdrawal may be enemy trick. Stand by for further instructions."

Presently, a patrol of seven men left the city and headed for the Assyrian tents. The group included two fleet-footed runners, who returned to Jerusalem an hour later with a startling report, the essence of which may be summed up as follows:

- The enemy camp is filled with the bodies of thousands of Assyrian soldiers.
- It is evident – from the black lumps on their faces, the distorted

features, and the almost unbearable stench that pervades the camp and its vicinity – that they died of the plague.

- The entire camp is in a state of utter disarray, indicating that those of its erstwhile occupants who were still alive had taken their departure in a great deal of haste.
- There can be no question of an enemy ruse. The catastrophe that has befallen the Assyrians is genuine. The bulk of their army has been put out of action for good. The few that escaped will not return.

Rumour Spreads quickly.

Rumours of our deliverance were quick to spread through the slowly waking city this morning, and people clambered onto rooftops and the city wall to gain a glimpse of the enemy camp.

Many rushed to the gates that had been closed tight for three weeks, trying to leave the city and take in the spoils. But the King had issued stern orders not to allow anyone to leave Jerusalem – for two reasons:

1. It was feared the whole affair might be an enemy trick (this was before we had received the report of our men.)
2. Even if it was not, there was danger of contamination.

The King's message

After our runners had brought in their report, and this had been confirmed by the rest of the patrol, the King made his appearance on the wall and addressed the people of Jerusalem.

The King intoned a prayer of thanks for the city's miraculous deliverance, urging the people to try to be worthy of the divine grace that has been bestowed upon us.

His Majesty announced the resumption of normal water distribution but warned against extravagance and waste in the use of this precious commodity. Shipments of fresh food, the King promised, will soon be rolling into the city once more.

AGES OF ETERNITY ?

Impact of space science upon Christian belief

In this article we are looking into the far-distant future, when the human race is fully at one with God, evil has vanished without trace, and death is a thing of the past. The Bible goes no farther than the close of the Millennium, with which is associated the disappearance of evil and the entry of reconciled men into everlasting life. Jesus alluded to that time in the words "*come ye*

blessed of my Father; inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Matt. 25.34). This, says Paul, is when Christ, at the close of his Millennial work with mankind *"shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, the Father, that God may be all in all"* (1 Cor.15.24). Of the state of humanity after that moment there is barely a hint, only that *"the dwelling of God is with man and there shall be no more death... for the former things are passed away... behold, I make all things new"* (Rev. 21.3-5). *"Behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former things shall not be remembered, nor come into mind"* (Isa.65.17). *"In the coming ages"* says Paul, God will *"show the immeasurable riches of his grace"* (Eph.2.7). The unassailable principle which the Bible enunciates with clear and definite voice is that life goes on; life is endless.

The idea of eternity is difficult to grasp and even today there are varying definitions of what is meant by the words 'eternal' and 'everlasting' in the Bible. They are usually rendered from the Greek *aionian* and the Hebrew *olain*, both of which imply duration or continuity in time as well as permanence of quality or state. This idea of duration, of continued progress in time, is increasingly being abandoned in modern thought and the thesis advanced that eternity is equivalent to timelessness, a condition of no-time, an eternal "now" in which the past, present and future exist simultaneously. It is almost as if some types of mind shrink from the prospect of perpetual conscious existence subject to sequential change and continuing experience, rather preferring a kind of Nirvana in which the mind ceases to concern itself with external activity and sinks into the embrace of a universal Consciousness having no purpose of object beyond the serene contemplation of an unchanging environment. This is not the Bible view; God is a God of action and activity, of ceaseless creativity and continuing achievement, and all his creatures are intended ultimately to take their places in an orderly system of created things of infinite variety and continuous development. And this implies duration and a consciousness of duration.

It is debatable whether intelligent life can continue on any other basis. Edmund Parsons, writing on the metaphysical problems of Time ("Time Devoured" 1964) has said that "all consciousness is consciousness of change, with duration as relative to it". Dr. Eisely ("The Firmament of Time" 1961) says that life, unlike matter, has a definite origin at a point in time and continues travelling in a unique fashion in the time dimension. Current investigations show that intelligent consciousness can only subsist when it is continually aware of, in contact with, and affected by, the varying characteristics of a changing environment. Life in eternity must be thought of as continued progress through new experiences and into new fields of knowledge, without end. Thus space, time, life and progress are all infinite and there can be no end or boundary to any of them, just as there can be no

end or limit to the creative power and activity of God.

Coming back from these rather exalted heights to the position of the redeemed and perfected human race at the end of the Messianic reign, the fact has to be faced that this planet earth, admirably adapted as it is for continued human life, is limited in size. The original Divine commission at man's creation to "be fruitful and increase, fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen. 1.28) has been measurably accomplished already, although the present fashionable forebodings about the earth's inability to support more than the seven thousand millions it has at the moment are wide of the mark and quite inaccurate. Under the present social system, controlled by greed and characterised by ignorance, it may well be so, but under the beneficent and wise administration of the Messianic Age the position will be very different. It has been reliably calculated that if full use was made of the available land surface and of usable solar energy reaching the earth sufficient food could be produced for fifty times the present population, although the planet would be uncomfortably crowded long before that number was reached. But even so, if life is to go on into the unlimited future it is clear that man must either migrate from the earth or stop procreating. The second alternative is sometimes thought to be unnatural, but is this really so? The same thing happens in everyday life. In the traditional life span of seventy years the procreative period of a married pair does not exceed some twenty-five years; the family is complete and the process ceases. It might well be that in a communal or racial sense God has ordained things the same way. If at a certain point in history, the original commission and power to "increase and fill the earth" will have achieved its purpose, and the power so to do comes to an end, the analogy with the individual family is exact. In such case the human race could be regarded as a unit of Divine creation, complete within itself and properly settled in this home in space which has been created for it.

The alternative — successive migrations to other homes in space — if considered from the purely physical standpoint, bristles with difficulties. Asimov, in "Planets for Man" (1965) says that, assuming the necessary technical problems could be solved in the next hundred years, it would be necessary from the year A.D. 2100 onwards to send into space 900,000 persons every day in order to keep the population of this earth within maximum limits. How such a number would survive, either on the journey or upon arrival at destination, is not stated. In any case no space-ship had been designed or even imagined which could make such a journey. There are high hopes of reaching our neighbour planet Mars, perhaps in 2030, but this is as far as serious thinking goes. The colossal amount of materials which would have to be taken from the earth's resources to transport and support such emigrants on such a scale on their way to a planet outside the solar system, even if such were possible, would exhaust the earth's total supply in a very

short time, and leave the situation worse than before.

The problem, though, is not really a physical one. If it should transpire in the purpose of God that men from this earth are to commence a new life at some other spot in the far recesses of the Universe then it can be expected that Divine power will call into action forces unknown to man and outside the range of his powers, to do what he cannot do of himself. The idea of instantaneous transfer to another life and another world is a familiar one in ordinary Christian theology. Scripture teaching is plain that at his Coming the Lord Christ takes to himself his faithful; the Apostle Paul describes this as a "change" from earthly to heavenly conditions (1 Cor.15.35-50), as being "*caught away to meet the Lord*" (1 Thess.4 16-17) where the word used literally is 'to be snatched away'. If such an instantaneous transfer is to be the experience of certain specific individuals, the Christian Church at one time in earth's history, and we know that this is the case, then no reason exists to doubt the feasibility of the same thing in a different sphere and to a different end at another time if such should be the Divine Will.

One apparently insurmountable objection to the idea that the earth will be the home of humanity to all eternity is the popular scientific view that the sun must one day cool down and in consequence all life be extinguished upon earth. A very complete process for the formation and eventual disintegration of stars has been worked out on the basis of observations and calculations from which it is believed in authoritative quarters that the sun has only about five thousand million years of useful life left to it. Having used up most of its hydrogen it will, in consequence of its reduced weight, enlarge in size and destroy the earth by its corresponding temporarily enhanced heat; it will then slowly cool and the solar system become a frozen and lifeless waste. If all this is true then there is obviously no eternal home for man upon earth. But no one can be sure that it is true. After all, no man has actually observed such processes taking place, for the time scale of the stars is too vast. In fact, observations of the past one hundred and fifty years, from which the stellar processes of twenty thousand million years have been deduced, are on the same time-scale as if a man, knowing nothing of Nature, should take a movie film of the plant life in his garden for just one quarter of a second and on the basis of that brief record form a complete theory of the growth of plants from seed-sowing to flower and fruitage during a complete year.

The theory of a dying sun is not universally held. One school of investigators believes that in its journey through space the sun sweeps up hydrogen to replace that which is consumed and converted to heat, as though the fire is being stoked up as fast as it burns. It has been discovered in quite recent years that the vast stretches of "empty space" between the stars are not empty at all; they are full of free atoms, mainly of hydrogen, and because

space is so big and the stars in it so relatively small, the material composing the stars is only about one ten-thousandth part of all the substance there is in the universe. The remaining 99.99 per cent is distributed loose throughout all space. The sun with its planets is travelling through space at a speed of 60,000 miles per hour so that it must inevitably collect a lot of that material in its course. Even the earth, much smaller, is known to be picking up a thousand tons of matter from outer space every day, in its course round the sun. However, this view is no longer widely held, as the amount gathered is much smaller than the amount used in any period of time. Observations of other stars and supernovae support the idea of our sun eventually running out, swelling and dying as mentioned above.

If someone suggests that, even so, in the infinity of eternity even this vast store of matter must be used up and where is the next lot coming from, science is already well on the track of the answer. A few generations ago it was almost universally believed that the entire universe was getting colder as the heat from the sun and stars was dissipated into space and that nothing could ever recover that lost heat. That belief was based on the so-called 'mechanical' view of the universe which regarded it as a vast machine powered by heat; when the heat was all gone the universe would come to a stop, cold and still.

The principle which gave rise to that theory was the then fairly new science of thermodynamics, treating of the relation and interaction between heat and energy, a science which dictates the design and capability of every kind of power generating device and every machine which needs power to drive it — since all power comes primarily from heat, through the agency of coal, oil, sunshine and so on. The chief apostle of this science was Nicolas Carnot (1796-1832) who was a good engineer but made no claim to being a theologian. He defined his thesis in terms now known as the "second law of thermodynamics" but he was talking about steam-engines and not about stars. Nevertheless it became fashionable to say that the universe cannot go on forever because of the second law of thermodynamics. But the universe does not consist fundamentally of steam-engines; it consists fundamentally of stars, and today different counsels prevail. The nature of the processes going on inside the stars is better understood, and there seems to exist a very real possibility that the energy generated by the annihilation of matter in stars is, at a later stage and elsewhere in the universe, reconstituted into matter which can be transformed again into energy. However, a contrary argument is that, although new stars are indeed formed from the remnants of old ones, as atoms and molecules are gathered together by gravity until large enough to form a new sun, energy is not transformed into matter again. Hence, the universe left to itself will either cool down or, if there is enough matter in it, attract itself into a smaller and smaller size until it ends in a big crunch. However,

scientists are beginning to perceive the rudimentary principles of a driving force which maintains the universe in ceaseless action and reaction the effect of which is to continue eternally the chemical interchanges between matter and energy upon which all life depends.

That driving force is God. He is the source of the energy which powers all creation, which under certain conditions and at one time appears as matter and under other conditions and at another time is manifested as active energy again. He is the source and sustainer of all life, which makes the use of that matter and that energy to function in its appointed manner. The universe is not a dying creation but an eternal one because it is sustained by the eternal Creator, "*in whose hand is the soul of every living thing and the breath of all mankind*" (Job 12.10). With that fact firmly established it matters nothing whether mankind is to find his eternal home on this earth or experience a later change of habitat from an old home due for dissolution to a new one newly blossoming into flower. The power of the Most High is adequate for the transfer, and since, to the redeemed, heaven is where God is, and God is everywhere, the geographical location, so to speak, of the "new heavens and new earth" which is the inheritance of perfected mankind is surely a minor issue. The Biblical pictures and foreviews of that consummation are expressed in terms of this earth as we know it, but that is the only possible manner in which the glories of the future can be described to men who have never known anything else but this earth. No matter where man may find himself in the eternal future it will always be a true picture; man's outward physical perfection, adjusted and adapted to a perfect outward environment, allied with his inward mental and moral relation to his Creator and his God, will ensure his absolute happiness and content in whatever place it pleases God that he should dwell.

So man approaches, not the end, but a new beginning. Perhaps that is, after all, the mystery of creation, a succession of endings that are also beginnings. Life goes on, reaching always forward, ever finding something new and something greater and grander on the way. There may, after all, be a more profound truth than has ever been suspected enshrined in those words which God utters when the world of human insufficiency gives place to the Divine rule of the future; "the former things are passed away; behold, I make all things new."

AOH

CHRIST IS THE HEAD

It is quite a common usage to call someone in authority the 'head'. An organisation will have its head, whether it be a commonwealth or a business firm. A school will have its head, a country has the head of its government. A father will normally be the head of his family. It is the head who has authority and makes the final decisions. The head controls the policy and the movements of his (or her) organisation. In ordinary speech it makes sense to ask who is the head of any organised group of people, including churches and denominations.

When the apostle Paul spoke of Christ being the head of the church which is his body, he had in mind a truth deeper and more significant. In another context, it would not be usual for the head of a school to describe the teachers and the secretary and the caretaker as his arms or his legs or his fingers. If he did it would raise a smile, and people might think he was saying it to be clever, or perhaps to make a point by saying something that was not literally true so as to make them think. Paul, speaking of Christ and the church, is speaking at a deeper level. He uses the metaphor to express not just the function of different 'parts of the body' but also the organic *connection of each part with the head*.

The scriptures which follow deal with this subject. Let them speak for themselves. Read each one. Meditate on it, think around it, what it means. Then it might be a good exercise for you to write down what the verses mean to you concerning the relationship between Christ and believers, between Him and you.

Colossians 1.13-20

Ephesians 1.17-23

Ephesians 4.15-16

Colossians 2.19

Ephesians 3.5-6

Colossians 2.8-19

1 Corinthians 12.12-14 & ff

Romans 12.4-8

Philippians 2.5-8

GIDEON, MAN OF VALOUR

3. A Mistake

The third phase of Gideon's career was marked by his making the ephod, the tragic mistake which blemished the brightness of his spectacular career.

As a successful military commander, hero of a notable victory, he was a very different man from the simple farmer pictured in Judges 6. At that time his implicit and obedient faith in God enabled him to carry out the Lord's commands to the letter and in consequence the Midianite hosts had been put to flight and the land delivered, as the Lord had promised. The fact that Gideon went beyond his instructions afterwards and allowed the remainder of Israel to help him destroy the enemy to a man may well be put down to an excess of zeal not justified by the necessity of the case, but his subsequent refusal to allow himself to be made king by his grateful countrymen and his insistence that the Lord must be their only king shows that his heart was still right. But this same zeal, even more unwisely directed, led him into serious trouble in the matter of the ephod.

It all began when Gideon rejected the plea that he become their king. Although he declined the invitation, he did ask of his countrymen one favour, that they would give him an offering of the gold rings taken from the defeated enemy and the ornaments taken from their camels. The request was received with enthusiasm and Gideon found himself possessed of a considerable amount of gold and other valuable regalia taken from the defeated kings. The upshot shows that Gideon did not want this for himself, but for the worship of God and the honour of his native village. Out of these golden rings and ornaments and luxurious clothing, we are told, he "*made an ephod, and put it in his city*" (village) "*in Ophrah*".

An ephod was a garment intricately constructed of valuable fabrics, precious stones and fine gold, worn by the High Priest of Israel as indication of his sacred office and by virtue of which he could approach to God for counsel and instruction. In later times possession of the ephod became invested with a kind of superstitious reverence and it was believed that any who could gain such possession would thereby be able to command a hearing and a response from God. There were two occasions in the life of David when he took it upon himself to summon the High Priest to his side so that with the aid of the ephod the Lord could be asked to give instructions as to forthcoming operations. But Gideon had been in close touch with God throughout this whole series of happenings and would hardly be likely to think the possession of an ephod necessary for any further instruction at this juncture. It becomes a valid question therefore: what was his purpose in doing

this?

The Tabernacle, which was the centre of Israel's worship and the responsibility of the Aaronic High Priest, at this time stood at Shiloh, having been finally erected there following a few years at Gilgal during the conquest of the Land. This was where the tribes came on the occasions of the great feasts and here the High Priest conducted the annual Day of Atonement ceremonies. But Shiloh was in the territory of the tribe of Ephraim, and there was no love lost between Ephraim and Manasseh, which was Gideon's own tribe.

Jealousy had existed between them from earliest times, when Manasseh the eldest son of Joseph had been passed over by the patriarch and the birthright conferred on Ephraim. Something of that jealousy emerges in this very story when the Ephraimites chided Gideon for not calling them to the battle before he had started the rout; his tactful reply in ch. 8. 1-3 avoided a serious clash but the animosity was there. Chapter 12 of Judges tells of another occasion when Ephraim was involved in fratricidal strife with men of Manasseh. It might well be, therefore, that Gideon had formed the idea that the institution of some kind of a centre for approaching God in the territory of Manasseh might well advance the status of his own tribe relative to the brother tribe and be welcomed by the northern tribes, Ashur, Zebulon and Naphtali, who had assisted him in the campaign. Already, a century or more in the past, a rival priesthood with images and ephod, in honour of Jehovah the God of Israel, had been set up in the extreme north by the tribe of Dan (the story is told in Judges chapter 18, but chronologically it was long before Gideon's day).

That centre of worship had degenerated into flagrant idolatry and the official priesthood at Shiloh had been able to do nothing about it. Perhaps Gideon, in his zeal for the Lord, thought that he could succeed where Shiloh had failed and at least establish a centre of worship more acceptable to the northern tribes than the one in the territory of the universally disliked tribe of Ephraim. If that was in fact his idea, he was grievously in error in supposing that any deviation from the Divine arrangement, no matter how sincerely undertaken, could be productive of anything but ill. Thus it was in this case; Gideon had in effect set up a rival sanctuary to the legal one in Shiloh and the consequence was that *"all Israel went thither a-whoring after it; which thing became a snare to Gideon, and to his house"*.

That expression means that unlawful worship and ceremonial was carried on in Abiezer of Manasseh and the fact that the Deity worshipped was the Ever-Living and not Baal did nothing to mitigate that fact. It is probable that Gideon established some kind of priesthood, and attempted to emulate in some degree the ceremonies which could rightfully only be observed at Shiloh.

Thus there were now three places in Israel claiming to represent God before the people, Shiloh in Ephraim, Dan in the far north where a renegade Levitical priesthood functioned, and this at Abiezer. The sad refrain of the Book of Judges comes to the mind *"In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did that which was right in his own eyes"*.

The wonder is that the knowledge and service of the God of Israel survived at all. Evidently it did in measurable degree, for after Gideon's victory the land had rest for the unusually long period of forty years, and this of itself denotes that there was no general apostasy. The most reasonable conclusion is that under Gideon's leadership the nation remained nominally loyal to God and the Covenant, and the shrines of Baal were destroyed, leaving a form of worship which so far as its ceremonial aspect was concerned represented no more than a pale reflection of what it could have been had the Covenant been zealously observed in all its provisions.

There is another possibility which may explain Gideon's institution of his rival sanctuary, an action so much out of character compared with his earlier scrupulous observance of Divine leading. At some time during the period of the Judges there was a violent disruption in the High Priestly family whereby the ordained succession from Aaron's son Eleazar was broken and the priestly office transferred to the descendants of Aaron's younger son Ithamar. The Scriptures are completely silent as to the details of this affair; it is not so much as mentioned anywhere. Jud. 20.28 indicates that Phinehas, son of Eleazar, was High Priest in his turn and then no more is recorded until, much later on, we find Eli, of the line of Ithamar, as High Priest in the days of Samuel. Josephus has a little more to say although the source of his information is unknown; he says that after Phinehas, his descendants Abishua, Bukki and Uni were High Priests and then the office passed to Eli who was the first High Priest of the line of Ithamar. Now the days of Eli's youth must have coincided fairly well with the time of Gideon. Eli is represented in the Scripture as an indolent and indifferent High Priest and his sons, his destined successors, irreverent and depraved. One wonders if some "power struggle" within the family of Aaron occurred at or just before the time of Gideon which resulted in the legal line of Eleazar being ousted from Shiloh and the junior line substituted by force and illegally. The reputation of Ephraim generally and the character of the inhabitants of its chief towns, Shechem, Bethel, Shiloh, and so on, was such that almost any kind of roguery could take place. Although Shiloh was the place where the Tabernacle stood for over four hundred years the Lord bitterly reproached the people there for their iniquity and predicted that his judgment would come upon it—as it did in the days of Samuel. *"But go ye now to my place which was in Shiloh"* He said to Jeremiah *"and see what I did to it for the wickedness of my people"* (Jer.

7.12). It was in fact the iniquity of the people and priesthood there in Ephraim that caused the Lord to take away the birthright which in Jacob's day had been given to Joseph, and to award it to Judah, so that Judah became the royal tribe. *"He forsook the tabernacle of Shiloh, the tent which he placed among men . . . he refused the tabernacle of Joseph, and rejected the tribe of Ephraim, and chose the tribe of Judah, the mount Zion which he loved. . . he chose David also his servant"* (Ps. 78. 59-71). What great crime was this which took place in the very place of God's sanctuary; what depth of iniquity was there in the lives of those people and priests in Ephraim which drew forth such condemnation from the Most High? The behaviour of Eli's sons during the boyhood of Samuel (1 Sam. 2.22) of Abimelech and the men of Shechem (Jud. 9) of Micah and his graven images in the very vicinity of Shiloh (Jud. 17) are only three incidents which show just how far gone in the ways of evil were these professed men of God.

Is it then possible that Shiloh had in the days of Gideon fallen into the hands of a faction which made Eli, or perhaps his father, High Priest in defiance of the legal rights of the Eleazar line and that the true High Priest—whether Uzzi or one of his successors, Zerariah or Meraioth, all recorded in 1 Chron. 6 as the legal line from Eleazar although not said to have been High Priests—was compelled to flee into exile? In such case he would most likely cross the border into Manasseh; the enmity between that tribe and Ephraim would assure him of a welcome and safety, and the Manassites would certainly recognise him as the legal holder of the office. Gideon had already erected an altar in his home village and named it Jehovah-shalom; "God will give peace", Did he now, in the flush of victory, add to his enthusiasm for the abolition of Baal worship a zeal for the service of God in a form which perhaps had not been known at Shiloh for many years past? Did he, in declining the offer of kingship over Israel, dream of a restored legal High Priest of the line of Eleazar, functioning not at Shiloh in Ephraim, but at Ophrah in Manasseh, and is this why he made the ephod?

We do not know. We only know that whatever the motive prompting his establishment of Divine service at the altar he had built, it was doomed to failure. It was not of Divine appointment. Despite all the shortcomings of the sanctuary at Shiloh, it was still the place where the Lord had put his Name. The Ark of the Covenant still reposed within the Most Holy and the mysterious Shekinah still illuminated that secret apartment with its supernatural light. It was for God, not Gideon, to say when the order of things was to come to an end. And when it did end, it was to Judah, not Manasseh, that the honour went: at Jerusalem, not Ophrah, where the Lord authorised a sanctuary for his name, and Solomon, not Gideon, who in due time was to restore the priestly office to the rightful line of Eleazar.

It is probable that Gideon's fault was over-enthusiasm for God and

failure to realise that enthusiasm itself can be a snare if it is not controlled by a scrupulous adherence to the Divine leading. It is not said of him in the case of the ephod, as it was in the case of the expedition, that he sought signs from God that he was doing the right thing. It might well have been that his righteous indignation at the godlessness of Shiloh convinced him that as virtual ruler of the nation he must strike another blow for God, not against external enemies this time but against internal enemies. He under-estimated the extent of irreligion which still existed in Israel. In destroying the altar of Baal at Ophrah and setting up in its place an altar to Jehovah; in doing away with the asherah and substituting an ephod, he had merely changed the name of the god and left the basic principle untouched. And so idolatry was not completely eliminated in Israel; it was merely driven underground to bide its time for its re-emergence. It was going to require the work of Samuel a century or two later to replace the corrupt and godless priesthood at Shiloh by a new and vigorous administration which would bring all Israel back to a real and living faith.

Nevertheless Gideon did much to arrest Israel's decline into apostasy. He lived forty years after his great victory and during all that forty years, under his administration, the land had rest from enemies, sure sign that in the main God was honoured and the Covenant observed. But it was largely a personal loyalty; *"as soon as Gideon was dead, the children of Israel turned again . . . and made Baal berith their god, and remembered not the Lord who had delivered them out of the hands of all their enemies on every side"*. (ch. 8. 33-39). A new generation arose that knew nothing of the famous deliverance except by the stories told by their grandfathers, and the whole sad experience had to be endured again.

So it has been throughout history; no generation seems able to learn from the mistakes of its predecessors; each must learn by actual experience. In their arrogance and self-will, pride in their own abilities and achievements, men will not brook being told what is for their good. They cannot endure the thought that they owe existence and life to a Higher Power and are as yet immature babes, unable to fashion their own lives and steer their own course aright without acceptance of guidance and instruction from on high.

The thirtieth chapter of Isaiah presents an eloquent lament on this sad propensity in the hearts of men and its inevitable consequences. The people refuse the word of the Lord and reject his prophets; the Lord intervenes to tell them that in quietness and confidence in him lies their real strength but they will not have him. *No*" say they *"for we will flee upon horses"* to which the Most High sadly responds *"therefore ye shall indeed flee"*. *"We will ride upon the swift"* they claim exultantly, and again, more sadly still, the response *"therefore they that pursue you shall be swift"*. There can be no escape from

the consequences of their own folly and short sightedness. At the end of it all there is only utter ruin.

But not for ever. Just because man is an immature babe, and is so to the end of this present earthly life, God will not cast him off for ever. The lessons will be learned, and eventually in a further stage of development men will emerge chastened but better for the experience. So says Isaiah as he continues his strain *"therefore will the Lord wait, that he may be gracious unto you for the Lord is a God of judgement; blessed are all they that wait for him . . . he will be very gracious unto thee at the voice of thy cry; when he shall hear it he shall answer thee. And though the Lord give you the bread of affliction and the water of affliction, yet . . . thine ears shall hear a word behind thee, saying, This is the way, walk ye in it"*.

Just as the Lord delivered Israel in the days of Gideon when they repented and cried unto him, so all who turn from their own ways to seek him in sincerity and submission, whether in this life or the next, whether before death or after resurrection, will experience the truth of that saying *"he will be very gracious unto thee at the voice of thy cry."* There will be, there must be, an end to the day of grace and the opportunity of salvation, a time when those who resolutely and in the face of full knowledge choose Baal instead of the Everliving, choose death which is all that Baal can give instead of life which comes only from the Everliving; but that moment does not come until the immature babe has been brought to the full stature of a man fully cognisant of the issues between life and death, between good and evil, between righteousness and unrighteousness, and with clear understanding of the principles involved and the effects of his decision makes his choice. Israel in the time of the Judges alternated between the true and the false, between life and death, many times, and Gideon was only one of the many Judges who rose up to deliver and bring them back to the right path. They always slipped back again. The coming Age in which the living and the dead will stand before a Divine Deliverer greater by far than Gideon will face a final crisis greater by far than that incursion of Midianites in that far-off day, for Christ is set to destroy all evil, not for a limited time as then when other nations eventually ravaged the land of Israel again, but for all time. And with the end of evil will come the end of evil-doers; at the end of the Messianic Age it is going to be gloriously true that *"in the name of Jesus every knee shall bow and every tongue confess, that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."*

The End.

AOH

ALL THESE VERSIONS

We sometimes wonder why in recent days so many different versions of the Bible are being created. It is said that over seventy English language versions were published in the second half of the twentieth century. Each one seems to arise from a slightly different need, perhaps the various idioms of 'English speaking' groups, perhaps a particular slant in matters of doctrine. Another factor may be, among those who have knowledge of languages, the human desire to 'do it yourself' and not rely upon the work of others. But underlying them all there is the one same need, seen against these differing backgrounds, the need to communicate the Gospel.

The *New English Bible* came into being because military chaplains realised that their soldiers could not understand a word of the Authorised Version (1961). The *Good News Bible* was born out of requests from missionaries for a bible that was 'friendly' to those for whom English was not their native language (1966). *J B Phillips* began his translation in 1941 for the benefit of his Youth Club - to convey the vitality and radiant faith as well as the courage of the early Church. This in war time. *The Message* has the intention of getting people to read the Bible who do not know that it is readable (2002). The *Twentieth Century New Testament* had its origin in the discovery that the English of the Authorised Version 'though valued by the more educated reader for its antique charm is in many passages difficult to those who are less educated' (1901). *Ferrar Fenton* did his work believing that 'an intelligible Bible means a restoration of faith' (1910). And *William Tyndale*, translating into English five hundred years ago, hoped to make the Bible thoroughly known to 'the boy that driveth the plough' and not just to the educated clergy who were presumed capable of reading it in Latin.

There have been so many versions, each with its own supporters. Well, God is a God of variety. Even the 'lilies of the field' which He clothes are not identical to one another (Matthew 6.28) [They are possibly gladiolus or iris, growing amid the corn. Also translated wild lilies, or in freer versions, wildflowers. "A reference to all the splendid colours and beautiful shapes of the numerous wild plants comprehended under the name 'lily'" (Hastings Bible Dictionary)]

And God is able to use each of these versions, however correct or incorrect, however much a paraphrase or however much tied closely word for word to the original Greek. Each version aims to convey His message into the hearts and minds of those who will be, or already are, believers. Each seeks to present His love and truth in the world where it is being published.

For each one there are stories of an effect in people's lives. For example:

An old distinguished looking man, perhaps in his late seventies, invites a guest into his study and takes out from the safe a packet of manuscripts. It is his translation of the New Testament. Ever since the 1881 Revised Version had been so disappointing, keeping as it did to the same outdated language as the AV, he has been working to produce a new version in modern speech, to convey what he judges the New Testament writers would have written if they had been living in late nineteenth century England.

The manuscript is brought out and he explains the reasons for some of his wording. For example, why the elder brother of the Prodigal Son says "all these years I have been *slaving* for you" - not just serving his father. Or why he writes 'the fire of the Ages' (Matthew 18.8) or the 'Life of the Ages' (Matthew 25.46) when translating the Greek word *aeonian*, rather than 'everlasting' or 'eternal'. He has his opinions, as a Baptist who has studied Greek for sixty years, who was headmaster at Mill Hill School and taught at University College, London.

But he tells his guest, "I've spent years over this, but I fear it will never see the light. The financial difficulties are too great", and sadly, "It has been done for His glory, and He knows."

Happily, some of the old boys from his school clubbed together to finance its publication. Sadly, Richard Francis Weymouth died before his version was actually published, in 1903.

It is 1917 and a young man is choosing a birthday present for his fiancée. He is a conscientious objector to military service, and has been sent a hundred miles away from his home, to work feeding pigs on a farm - better than joining in the killing of the Great War. He is able to find for her a copy of 'The New Testament in Modern Speech' by R F Weymouth, D.Lit. Third edition, sixth impression. He writes an appropriate (if embarrassing) greeting on the flyleaf, together with the reference Romans 8.28 *"Now we know that for those who love God all things are working together for good - for those, I mean, whom with deliberate purpose He has called."*

Thirty or more years on, and a teenager is spending a lazy morning in bed, as teenagers do when they get the chance at a week-end. On Sunday he will go along with his parents to the Bible Study. It is a very slow study, a

few verses each week from the two-columned black bibles. There are references to look up, concordances to refer to, and the old 'modern' translations to compare, such as Rotherham, or Ferrar Fenton, or Moffatt - now Moffatt is good for a surprise. He might alter the order of the verses to make better sense, and as for calling Noah's Ark a barge!

This particular day the teenager looks along his parents' bookshelves, and his eyes fall on a slim black volume, 'New Testament in Modern Speech - Weymouth'. Yet another version. He plucks it out, settles back between the sheets, and begins to read. And read. And read. The story flows, and comes to life.

For many mornings afterward 'Weymouth' was his reading of choice. One of its treasures was repeated in a plaque on the wall: "*Love is patient and kind. Love knows neither envy nor jealousy. Love is not forward and self assertive, nor boastful and conceited.... she finds no pleasure in injustice done to others, but joyfully sides with the truth..... full of trust, full of hope, full of patient endurance.*"

In the process of reading, a new Christian life is being formed.

GC

STUDIES IN THE FIRST EPISTLE OF JOHN

Part 27

1 John 5.13-15

"These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God." (Vs. 13.)

"You that believe," "Ye may know," "Ye may believe"; all these affirmations of conviction crowd one upon another in this verse and those immediately following. We are coming very rapidly now to the end of the epistle and John's thought is entirely for those who have so given themselves to God in whole-hearted surrender that they are now members of the Divine family. No room in these last intimate passages for the world. No time left now to consider those who have never accepted Christ. John is not heedless of them and their needs but he knows that a day yet to come will give all such every possible opportunity to repent of their past heedless ways and come at last into lowly surrender. "*God hath appointed a day in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the*

dead" (Acts 17. 31). So that although John knew full well that ' the time had already come when God "*commandeth all men everywhere to repent*" and had played his own part in proclamation of the Gospel of the Kingdom as a he now turns away from that general work and devotes himself to the deeper, interests of the inner circle of disciples.

Full well did John know that, as with Paul, so with himself, after his departing grievous wolves would enter in, not sparing the flock. And John desired, as did Paul, to finish his course "free from the blood of all men". He wanted to render a good report of his stewardship, so his last words to the Church on earth are words of Christian counsel and encouragement, words that give strength and stamina to Christian character, so that those who receive may neither run nor labour in vain. That is why John talks so much about believing and knowing in these last verses.

The belief and knowledge is not that of intellectual things but that of the heart and life. These of whom he says they have believed on the name of the Son of God are not those who have believed about Jesus. The knowledge they possess that in John's view is of such supreme importance is not the knowledge of how Jesus redeemed them and all the philosophy of the Ransom, but the knowledge that Jesus *has* redeemed them. It is not so much the knowledge precisely how we, the Church, are joint-heirs with His glory and sharers in His sufferings and by what process of legal form we have attained to that position, but the knowledge that we are, in sober fact, associated with Him in all that He is and does. We have as it were placed our hands in His and given Him our trust and we know that henceforward all is well. Therefore, in John's own phrase, we know that we have eternal life, and nothing of all the arguments and sophistries of man can rob us of that unshakable conviction.

"And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask anything according to his will, he heareth us: and if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him." (vs. 14, 15.)

This is going back to the words of Jesus yet again. No less than four times did John record those words in his Gospel. It is clear that Jesus must have repeated that assurance many times during His ministry and clear that John must have been quick to pick up the words. *"Whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If ye shall ask anything in my name, I will do it."* (John 14. 13-14.) *"I have chosen you . . . that whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in my name, he may give it to you."* (John 15. 16). *"In that day ye shall ask me nothing. Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you. Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name: ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full."* (John 16. 23-24.) So often have there been long and serious debates over the scope and extent of this promise. Did Jesus mean

literally anything that we could conceivably ask? If there is a limit, what is that limit and why is it not defined in one or more of these many texts? As it stands the promise is definite enough. Whatever we ask, provided it is in His name, will be granted to us. That would seem to include everything, even things that might not be good for us or might even react against our endeavour to walk worthily of Him who has called us to His kingdom and glory. The secret, of course, lies in the obvious fact that none of those addressed are of those who would misapply the promise anyway. All to whom the words are spoken can already be trusted to make intercession *"according to the will of God"*. (Rom. 8. 27.) *"Thy Will be done!"* *"Nevertheless not as wilt, but as thou wilt"* is always the unspoken element in every supplication that goes up to the Majesty on high.

There is a more intimate aspect of this matter that we do well to consider at this point. We can picture to ourselves the total immersion of our own wills into the will of God so that we can honestly say we as independent individuals have subordinated our own aims and impulses and desires to the overruling dictation of our God, but then there is a mystic but very real sense in which we are no longer independent individuals. In coming into Christ we have become one with Him and one with His Father; and that oneness can only be attained and maintained if our wills are so closely attuned to His that we begin to think and speak and act as He does. *"Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus"* is the Apostle's admonition and it is not an empty one. It implies a unity of mind which is much deeper and more intimate than the position of two independent minds who merely happen to think and react alike. Jesus prayed that His disciples might be one, one with each other and one with Him and with His Father. *"That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us . . . that they may be one, even as we are one; I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one . . ."* (John 17. 21-23.) Those were not meaningless words; they were uttered to give expression to a truth too profound for any of us fully to comprehend in the flesh, even although we may glimpse something of its ideal and seek in our own imperfect way to make some progress toward it.

There is something here that touches the fundamental relationship between God the Creator and Life-giver, and the creatures to whom He has given life—, and from whom He can withdraw life. *"In him we live, and move, and have our being"* declared Paul to the philosophers of Athens. *"Thou takest away their breath, they die, and return to their dust. Thou sendest forth thy spirit, they are created, and thou renewest the face of the earth"* sang the Psalmist (Psa. 104. 29-30.) The spirit, says the Preacher in Ecclesiastes, returns to God who gave it. What really is the relation between

man and His Maker? What is this life that pulsates in our bodies and makes thinking, intelligent beings out of a mere collection of chemicals shaped like a human body? To what extent is it still a part of the Divine life? It certainly is entirely dependent upon the decree of God. He bestows and withdraws at will: He can give everlasting life or relegate to eternal death. Can it not be therefore that in some very real sense we who have become joint-heirs with Christ have entered into a true oneness with God which finds its deepest expression in this present time in the spiritual communion that we have with the Father, and will in future days beyond the Vail enlarge into an even closer oneness that now we cannot even begin to visualise? Perhaps, after all, one reason that the things we pray for are always in harmony with the will of God is this very fact, that we have become so much one with Him that the mind which frames the prayers and the will that prompts the requests are already so fully in tune with the mind and will of God that it is not possible for us to ask for things that are contrary to His will. That at any rate is an ideal to be striven for and the more we seek to make such a condition a reality in our lives the more we shall find that these few verses in John's epistle are truly descriptive of our own experience.

Of course this does not imply that all the things we might at first impulse request are going to be automatically given to us. There are so many petitions we could—and do—present on the basis of our old natural outlook that sober reflection would compel us to admit are not good for us. There is always the heartfelt appeal inspired by some deep and dear earthly love that ascends to heaven in perfect sincerity but finds no affirmative reply. But many a time that is only the immediate stress of our human affections and desires looming up strongly before us and crying for some consideration. Behind the immediate urgency of the petition there is always the background thought "Thy Will be done". The stress of the moment may infuse a sharp note of appeal into the prayer but behind the urgency there is a calmness that comes from knowing that our God is *"too wise to err; too good to be unkind"*, and as we rise from our knees we know that whether the plea be granted or whether it be refused, it is still true that "we have the petition that we desired of him". So many have thanked God in after days because the answer was "No". They have realised, looking back, how much better it has been that it was so. So the One who knoweth what things we have need of before we ask Him will always answer our petitions, not according to the words of our lips, but according to the desires of our hearts. As He did with Ezekiel, He may take away the desire of our eyes at a stroke, yet we shall be able to say "It is the Lord; let him do what seemeth him good". And that is not a weak, spineless acquiescence in the decree of One whose power cannot be challenged, but an intelligent and willing union with Him in what He has decreed shall be done. We have the

petitions we ask of him because we are one with Him, and what He will have, we will have too. John calls this "the confidence that we have in him". He could have chosen no better word. We have confidence, from the human standpoint trusting where we cannot see, and so willingly accepting His decision; from the spiritual standpoint, entering into His decision and identifying ourselves with it so that it becomes our own decision also.

(To be concluded)

AOH

SEASONS

Dull the meadows, grey the skies;
Cold the dawn, too soon the evening;
Bare trees black from snowdrift rise,
Silent, still, all lifeless seeming.

Bright the meadows, freshly green;
Skies aglint with rainclouds swirling;
Forest soft with bluebell sheen,
Buds a-break, new leaves unfurling.

Cornfields ripen, green to gold;
Red fruit rich in orchard swelling;
Hills far-ranged from haze unfold;
Shade in pinewood sweetly-smelling.

Cornfields empty, harvest taken;
Dying sunset, dawn frost hoary;
Dewy fields and golden bracken;
Forest leaves ablaze in glory.

Dull the meadows, grey the skies;
Cold the dawn, too soon the evening;
Bare trees black from snowdrift rise,
Silent, still, all lifeless seeming.

One by one the seasons follow -
Growth, maturity, and grieving -
Power, prosperity and sorrow -
Spring's arrival, Autumn's leaving.

We grow to fruit, and fruiting o'er,
Serene on Autumn wonders gazing,
Contemplate what wonders more
Shall appear in Spring's upraising.

It doth not yet appear what we shall be. 1 John 3.2

GC

THE OLD IS GOOD

Many of our readers will have been brought up on the Authorised Version, the King James Version, and for some it may be the only version that they use. It is well loved, familiar, and well remembered. Over the last hundred years a great number of new translations have been made into the language people speak today. What follows is a comparison of a few verses in 1 Peter taken from modern versions and from the traditional one.

The first column contains ten verses from 1 Peter each in a 'modern' version. You are invited to find the equivalent of each one in the second, AV, column. These are all translations of God's word in the original Greek. What is your opinion of them?

You might like to test yourself to see if you can repeat each verse from memory (get someone to listen to you and check if you are accurate!) Try some out of the AV column and some out of the modern. Which are the easiest to memorise?

Modern versions

You had wandered away like so many sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls. JBP

Above everything, love one another earnestly, because love covers over many sins. GNB

So, humble yourselves under God's strong hand, and in his own good time he will lift you up. You can throw the whole weight of your anxieties upon him, for you are his personal concern. JBP

He who would love life and enjoy good days, let him keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking guile. JM

Christ himself carried our sins in his

Authorised Version

Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the Spirit unto obedience and the sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ.

Chapter 1 v.1

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. 1.3

For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: but the word of the Lord endureth for ever.

1.24-5

body to the cross, so that we might die to sin and live for righteousness. It is by his wounds that you have been healed. GNB

Thank God, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, that in his great mercy we have been born again into a life full of hope, through Christ's rising again from the dead! JBP

That's why the prophet said
The old life is a grass life
its beauty as short-lived as wild flowers.
Grass dries up, flowers droop,
God's word goes on and on for ever. EHP

You are babies, new born in God's family, and you should be crying out for unadulterated spiritual milk to make you grow up to salvation! JBP

But you are a chosen race, a priesthood of kingly lineage, a holy nation, a people belonging especially to God, that you may make known the perfections of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvellous light. RFW

Whom God the Father has predestined and chosen, by the consecration of the Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with his blood. JM

JM James Moffatt 1922
RFW Richard Francis Weymouth 1903
JBP J B Phillips 1972 (revised edition)
GNB Good News Bible 1966
EHP Eugene Peterson, The Message 2002

As newborn babes desire the sincere milk of the word that ye may grow thereby. 2.2

But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. 2.9

Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed. 2.24

For ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls. 2.25

For he that will love life, and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips that they speak no guile. 3.10

And above all things have fervent charity among yourselves, for charity shall cover the multitude of sins. 4.8

Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time. Casting all your care upon him, for he careth for you. 5.6-7

A Thought on Creation

We know God made everything and that it was executed in a specific sequence, starting with 'the heaven and the earth', that is, the universe. We read in verse 2 of Genesis 'the earth was without form and void' - having no form or shape and full of nothingness. Only a gas has no shape, and this could have exploded and created the earth, beginning the existence of the universe. The 'Big Bang' suggested by scientists to have taken place some 14 billion years ago agrees with this statement. So the earth was in existence before the creative days began. The creation is mathematical and in proper scientific order. 'Let there be light' on day 1 is fulfilled on day 4 with 'Let there be two great lights'. Day 2 'Sky and water' is populated on day 5 with 'creatures like fowl, and great whales' Dry ground, day 3, inhabited on day 6 with 'cattle, creeping thing and beast of the earth'. This is the correct scientific order, water before fish and dry land before animals, all completed before man later on day 6. There are long intervals between the days, in which mountains would rise and fall, trees would grow, die, be covered and result for example in seams of coal, and fossilised insects. To illustrate this, suppose an artist paints a picture in oils. He starts by getting the canvas and then paints the background and sky. The canvas is then left for a week or two to dry. Next the mountains and sea are inserted, followed by a further period of drying. Finally fish, animals and some people are painted. After perhaps many months the picture is complete. The artist has worked for 6 days, but the total production time has been much longer. So with creation. DSS

NOTICES

Address for correspondence

Please note the new address for all correspondence concerning the Bible Fellowship Union and the Monthly. This is the first change of address for nearly twenty years, and we give our warm thanks to Derrick Nadal for his diligent, loving service through all of this time.

High Leigh Conference

At High Leigh Conference Centre, Hoddeson, Herts. From Monday to Sunday, August 13—19. Bookings by June 30 to Joan Charcharos 01442 381550 10 Plaiters Close, Tring HP23 5TA email: nick.charcharos@btinternet.com There will be a baptismal service this year..

An apology

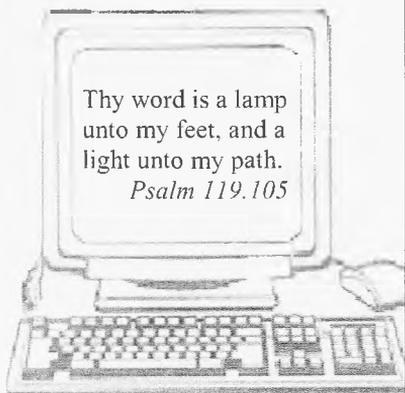
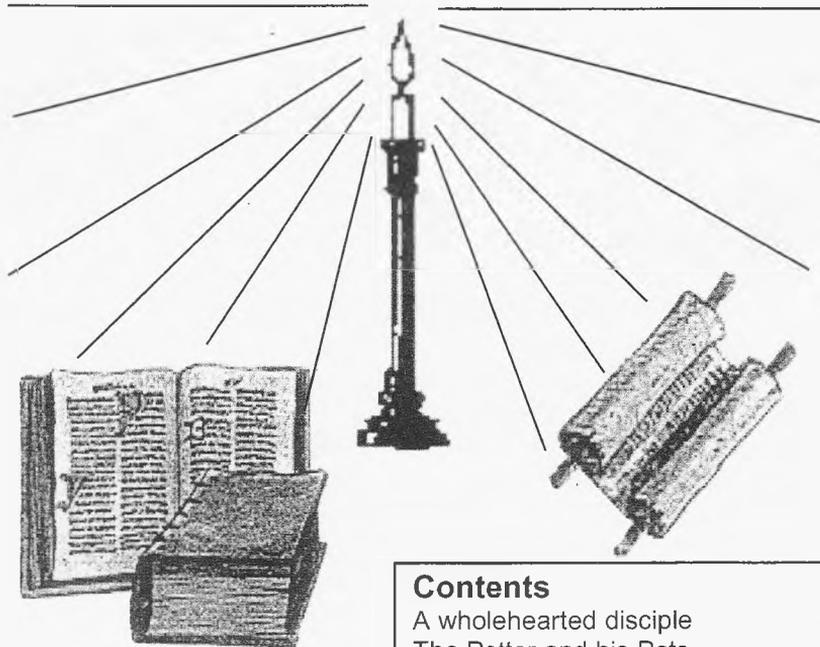
You may be one of those who noticed the incorrect date and number on our last issue. The issue containing pages 41 to 80 is in fact Vol.89 No.2 March/April 2012.

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BIBLE STUDY MONTHLY

FOUNDED 1924

The Bible Study Monthly is published to promote knowledge of the Bible. It sees the Scriptures as a true record of God's dealings with the human race, needing to be understood in our generation. It looks for the advent of our Lord, and His reign of peace and justice on the earth. *"Speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into Him who is the head, into Christ"* (Ephesians 4:15 NRSV)

The Bible Study Monthly is sent free of charge to all who are genuinely interested, on request. (Please renew your request annually.)
It is supported entirely by the gifts of its readers which are sincerely appreciated.

A WHOLEHEARTED DISCIPLE

If we were looking in scripture for an example of a wholehearted disciple, would we choose Thomas?

Thomas, the Twin, was one of Jesus' chosen twelve, but some have the impression that he would not have been a very positive person. Did he not refuse to believe that Jesus had risen from the dead? Through history he has been known as 'Doubting Thomas'. At first sight he seems far less wholehearted in his discipleship than the eager enthusiastic Peter (though even Peter famously suffered a loss of nerve and courage on the night before Calvary).

So was Thomas wholehearted? It depends what we mean by wholehearted. A modern dictionary gives the meaning as 'sincere and committed', and an older dictionary adds the thoughts of being earnest, generous, zealous. There are different sorts of wholeheartedness. For example, imagine the case of a plan being put forward to build a massive hydro-electric scheme which would involve removing inhabitants from their homes and submerging whole villages. The authorities would be intellectually wholehearted in their support for the scheme because they understood the benefits for the whole area of clean water, irrigation, and electric power. The local inhabitants would be passionately wholehearted against the scheme because their lives and their way of life were to be destroyed. All involved were wholehearted, some governed by their understanding and others by emotion. In the same way there are different

sorts of Christian discipleship. We can give Jesus our loyalty because of what he is doing and what we believe about him. Or we may take him to our hearts as Master and Friend.

So where did Thomas stand? There are three occasions recorded toward the end of John's gospel in which he comes out badly.

The first was when Jesus had been told that his dear friend Lazarus was sick. Lazarus lived in Judea where Jesus' enemies were. After two days delay Jesus told the disciples they were going back there. "Rabbi, you can't do that. The Jews are out to kill you, and you're going back?" Jesus explained. Lazarus was asleep - dead - and Jesus was going to awaken him. As they set off, Thomas, characteristically pessimistic, said to them all, "Come along. We might as well die with him." What lack of optimism! This was not expectant faith, more like loyal despair.

Is such a negative, bleak remark compatible with being a wholehearted disciple? It seems that it was Thomas who took a lead among the disciples, it is not reported that anyone else said anything. They must all have been equally dismayed at the risk Jesus was taking, but it was Thomas who urged them to follow Jesus into danger. It was in the spirit of 'Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him' (Job).

The second occasion when Thomas spoke in a negative way was after the Last Supper. It was a very fraught occasion, emotions ran deep. Jesus had clearly indicated he was going to leave them, die. He spoke a long time with his disciples, giving them his last instructions, explanations, saying goodbye. He said, "Don't let this throw you. You trust God, don't you? Trust me. There is plenty of room for you in my Father's home. If that weren't so, would I have told you that I'm on my way to get a room ready for you? I'll come back and get you so you can live where I live. And you already know the road I'm taking." Christians in later years have treasured this promise of the 'home with many rooms' and have taken it to themselves. But Thomas blurted out, "Master, we have no idea where you're going. How do you expect us to know the road?"

Thomas was taking Jesus literally when He meant something more. The disciples often did this, but on this occasion it was Thomas putting his clumsy foot in it. He was genuinely puzzled what Jesus intended to do. He wanted to understand. Someone has said about Thomas that he was 'too honest and far too much in earnest to be satisfied with any vague or pious expression'. He wanted to know what did Jesus expect of them, what was the route?

Jesus explained. "I am the route" - the road - the way. It was not a matter of geography but of trusting him, obeying him. If you trust me, follow

me, you will come safely to the Father's house. And if you want to know what the Father is like, look at me and you will see the truth about the Father. And if it is eternal life you are hoping for, I myself bring life from the Father. "I am the way, the truth, the life." He said all this because Thomas did not pretend that he understood Jesus, but asked a question. All this was for them to remember afterwards, and think about.

Thomas's downright, realistic, no-nonsense attitude was apparent on the third occasion, which earned him his posthumous title of 'Doubting Thomas'. He had not been present on the first occasion when Jesus, alive from the dead, appeared to the group of disciples. "We have seen the Master" they told him when they met. He did not believe them. It was too good to be true. He could only believe it if he saw and touched for himself.

Thomas of course is criticised. Why was he missing when Jesus appeared to them? He ought to have been there, with them. If he had, he would have avoided a week's uncertainty and bitter grief. Was he missing so as to bear in solitude his overwhelming disappointment and loss? It is also said that he should not have been so emphatic when he refused to believe the others. Could he not take their word for Jesus being alive? We, of course, were not there to hear the tone of his voice when he rejected their testimony. We do know he needed to assess the evidence for himself: seeing is believing. And Jesus met his need to see. And he did believe. And with what wholehearted joy he exclaimed, "My Master! My God!"

Each one who follows our Lord wholeheartedly has a different personality. There are those like Peter in his enthusiasm who think they are secure in their obedience, and then are tested as Peter was, under the stress of Jesus' arrest. On the other hand, Thomas had an opposite tendency, he spoke less than was in his heart. When his mind told him that Jesus was running into extreme danger, he gave his opinion, but still followed. When his mind could not understand what Jesus was saying about the route to his Father's house, he had the courage to ask, and the reply he received is one for us all. When his mind could not accept the fanciful notion that Jesus had risen from the dead, he stated his personal need for hard evidence, and was personally given the evidence he required, to his great joy.

So may we in our different ways be equally wholehearted as we follow our Lord. If we cannot understand our fellow disciples, let us persevere. If there is risk, let us persevere. If our faith and courage do not feel strong enough, let us persevere. Persevering we shall assuredly enter into the joy of our Lord.

(Bible quotations taken from The Message)

GC

THE POTTER AND HIS POTS

(Taken from a talk given at the Blaby Convention, 27 May 2012)

Read 2 Corinthians 4.1-18

God the Potter

The prophet Jeremiah had a lot to contend with. God called him to the prophetic ministry when he was still just a boy. God used Jeremiah mightily, but generally He gave him messages for his own people which they really didn't want to hear, so poor old Jeremiah was much persecuted by the Jews, and his name has become proverbial for a bearer of bad news! In chapter 18 of his prophecy, God tells Jeremiah to act out a parable:

'This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: "Go down to the potter's house, and there I will give you my message." So I went down to the potter's house, and I saw him working at the wheel. But the pot he was shaping from the clay was spoiled in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him. Then the word of the Lord came to me: "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does?" declares the Lord. "Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel Now therefore, say to the people of Judah and those living in Jerusalem, 'This is what the Lord says: Look! I am preparing a disaster for you and devising a plan against you. So turn from your evil ways, each one of you, and reform your ways and your actions.'"

What is God saying here? He's saying, 'Jeremiah, go and tell the people that **I** am the Potter, **they** are the clay. I created Israel – my beautiful pot! – but Israel has sinned, and unless they 'turn from their evil ways', I may have to destroy them. But – it's not too late for them to relent and to repent, and to let me re-mould that mis-shapen clay into a new, God-fearing nation.'

And God doesn't stop there. In the next chapter, He has a new task for Jeremiah: *'This is what the Lord says: "Go and buy a clay jar from a potter. Take along some of the elders of the people and of the priests and go out to the Valley of Ben Hinnom, near the entrance of the Potsherd Gate. There, proclaim the words that I tell you, and say, 'Hear the word of the Lord, O kings of Judah and people of Jerusalem.'*

'This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Listen! I am going to bring a disaster on this place that will make the ears of everyone who hears of it tingle. For they have forsaken me and made this a place of foreign gods; they have burned sacrifices in it to gods that neither they nor their fathers nor the kings of Judah ever knew, and they have filled this place with the blood of the innocent. Then break the jar, while those who go with you are watching, and say to them, 'This is what the Lord Almighty says: I will smash this nation and this city, just as this potter's jar is smashed and cannot be

repaired.'

Desperate measures, for desperate times! And here is a verse from his Book of Lamentations, chapter 4, grieving over how the Israelites had become devalued in God's eyes. He writes, *'How the precious sons of Zion, once worth their weight in gold, are now considered as just pots of clay, the work of a potter's hands!'*

Did you notice the reference to 'the Potsherd Gate'? The KJV describes it (quite correctly, in its way, but not literally) as 'the entry of the east gate', but the New Living Bible calls it more literally 'The Gate of Broken Pots' – the Hebrew word is '*Harsith*'. Archaeologists reckon that, in those days, because the kilns in which they were fired couldn't generally achieve a high enough temperature, cooking-pots were quite fragile, and very easily broken – apparently, a large family might get through as many as one pot a week! That would have kept the price down, for sure, but it must have also meant that there were bucket-loads of broken potsherds being chucked out daily, and it seems that the East Gate of Jerusalem – 'The Gate of Broken Pots' – was the favoured route down to the official City Rubbish Dump below – the Valley of Ben Hinnom, or (as we also know it) Gehenna, where the burning rubbish was always smouldering away. (If any of you saw Professor Mary Beard's fascinating series of BBC2 programmes about ordinary people living in Ancient Rome, you'll have seen shots of a huge mountain of broken potsherds, which still survives in the middle of Rome, to this day!)

So what is it about 'Pots and Potters', then? – they keep cropping up, in the Bible. We've already heard Jeremiah on the subject, and now here's Isaiah, in ch.45: *'Woe to him who quarrels with his Maker, to him who is but one potsherd among the many potsherds on the ground. Does the clay say to the potter, 'What are you making?'*

Isaiah yet again: a well-known passage, full of regret, from chapter 64: *'All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away. No-one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us and made us waste away because of our sins. Yet, O Lord, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not be angry beyond measure, O Lord; do not remember our sins for ever. Oh, look upon us we pray, for we are all your people.'*

You can find the same kind of imagery in the New Testament, too. It occurs in 2nd Corinthians, and here is Paul again, writing to the Romans, in chapter 9: *'God has mercy on those whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens the hearts of those whom he wants to harden. One of you will say to me: "Then why does God still blame us? For who can resist his will?" But who*

are you, O man, to talk back to God? Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?' Doesn't the potter have the right to make, out of the same lump of clay, some pottery for noble purposes, and some for common usage?'

Little Clay Pots

My first wife, Margot died of cancer in 1985. One of her little sayings was, 'We always need to remember that we're all just 'little clay pots', really,' and I suppose she got that expression from Paul saying to the Corinthians, '*We have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.*' The conclusion that Paul reached was that '*Therefore we don't lose heart. Though outwardly we're wasting away, yet inwardly we're being renewed, day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So – we fix our eyes not on what's seen, but on what's unseen.*'

There's *hope* for us 'little clay pots', then!

'A little clay pot' is one of the most enduring and graphic images. You take a lump of soft clay, you throw it onto a revolving wheel, or you mould it in some other way, until it takes on the shape that you want it to have. If you're happy with the result, you might decide to decorate it, and then you've got your pot. But if you're not happy with the result, you simply mash the clay down again, and then you start over.

Now if you're the *potter*, that's fine, of course. You're in charge. But what if you're the *clay*? That's more challenging. The relationship between the potter and the pot is a truly intimate one. The potter is the 'hands-on' creator.

I have a mug which, at first glance, looks like a perfectly ordinary mug. Probably, you would think, there are hundreds of identical ones around, coming off the assembly-line at some pottery. But you would be wrong! This is a hand-made mug, produced for Traidcraft at a small pottery in Pondicherry, India, and though there are indeed other similar mugs around, no two will be identical. Look carefully, and you see that it's slightly mis-shapen, and that there are the marks of two fingers and a thumb on this mug – two fingers and a thumb which belonged to the Indian potter who made it.

FINGERPRINTS

Gently working,

Potter's hands;

Kneading, shaping,

Softening clay.

Moulding, flexing.

*Changing form,
With skilful eyes the guide
To see
Beyond the lump of lifeless clay
A vision of what lies within:
Potential yet to come to birth,
Created from his loving touch
And his fingertip imprints
On the clay.*

*Lord, let me be
As clay within Your hands,
That you may shape
The me You hold within Your dreams
And I may know
Your fingerprints
Upon my life.*

Pat Marsh, England

[From 'A Place for Us', compiled by Geoffrey Duncan]

You and I are indeed 'little clay pots', and each of us is an individual – each of us is different. We're made from what God calls 'the dust of the ground' – in other words, 'clay'. Here is part of what the scholars sometimes refer to as 'The Second Creation Account', from Genesis chapter 2: *'This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created. When the Lord God made the earth and the heavens – and no shrub of the field had yet appeared on the earth and no plant of the field had yet sprung up, for the Lord God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no man to work the ground, but streams came up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the ground – the Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.'* 'The dust of the ground', and 'The breath of life' – those are the raw materials from which you and I are made. The one can't operate without the other: 'The dust of the ground', and 'The breath of life'. Take my breath away, and I die – Dust to dust ... ashes to ashes'.

It is interesting to remember, I think, that Jesus actually *used* 'the dust of the ground' to heal a blind man. This is from John chapter 9: *'As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. ... He spat on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and he put it on the man's eyes. "Go," he told him, "wash in the Pool of Siloam". So the man went, and washed, and came home seeing.'* You may wonder whether, maybe, the man had cataracts? – at all events, Jesus used

'the dust of the ground' to heal him; but, on occasion, Jesus also used 'the breath of life'. After his Resurrection, but still some days before Pentecost, Jesus gently introduced his frightened disciples into The Life of the Spirit by literally breathing on them, just as God had originally breathed into Adam's nostrils. This is from John chapter 20:

'On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them, and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." '

'The dust of the ground', formed into 'a little clay pot', and then – in some marvellous way known only to God – empowered and enlightened by 'The breath of life'; '... and the man became a living being.'

Broken

Clay pots are fragile things – they are all-too-easily broken. And we, too, are fragile – easily cracked, easily broken. Life can seem precarious – as we grow older, we may experience hardships: old friends and family members may get sick, and perhaps die; we ourselves may experience health or other problems. We can be truly grateful for our National Health Service; it may be able to repair the pot, and perhaps replace a hip, here or there, but it can't yet make a completely new pot for us, from scratch!

Paul says in 2nd Corinthians, *'we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.'*

'Broken-ness' sounds like a terrible thing, doesn't it! – the very last thing that we would choose to experience. And yet ... and yet ... 'broken-ness' is precisely what is required of us, before we can truly enter into what that great Chinese Christian known as 'Watchman Nee' called 'The Normal Christian Life'.

What has to be 'broken'? – well, not our individuality, but our self-centredness. Not our personality, but our stubborn-ness. And how does God achieve this? – not by hitting us with a hammer until we give in to him, but by bringing us to the foot of the Cross, and showing us there how Victory comes

through Self-sacrifice.

*The Master was searching for a vessel to use;
On the shelf there were many - which one would He choose?
Take me, cried the gold one, I'm shiny and bright,
I'm of great value and I do things just right.
My beauty and lustre will outshine the rest
And for someone like You, Master, gold would be the best!*

*The Master passed on with no word at all;
He looked at a silver urn, narrow and tall;
I'll serve You, dear Master, I'll pour out Your wine
And I'll be at Your table whenever You dine,
My lines are so graceful, my carvings so true,
And my silver will always compliment You.*

*Unheeding the Master passed on to the brass,
It was wide mouthed and shallow, and polished like glass.
Here! Here! cried the vessel, I know I will do,
Place me on Your table for all men to view.*

*Look at me, called the goblet of crystal so clear,
My transparency shows my contents so dear,
Though fragile am I, I will serve You with pride,
And I'm sure I'll be happy in Your house to abide.*

*The Master came next to a vessel of wood,
Polished and carved, it solidly stood.
You may use me, dear Master, the wooden bowl said,
But I'd rather You used me for fruit, not for bread!*

*Then the Master looked down and saw a vessel of clay.
Empty and broken it helplessly lay.
No hope had the vessel that the Master might choose,
To cleanse and make whole, to fill and to use.
Ah! This is the vessel I've been hoping to find,
I will mend and use it and make it all Mine.*

*I need not the vessel with pride of its self;
Nor the one who is narrow to sit on the shelf;
Nor the one who is big mouthed and shallow and loud;*

*Nor one who displays his contents so proud;
Not the one who thinks he can do all things just right;
But this plain earthy vessel filled with My power and might.
Then gently He lifted the vessel of clay.
Mended and cleansed it and filled it that day.
Spoke to it kindly. There's work you must do,
Just pour out to others as I pour into you.* *B V Cornwall*

This sense of 'broken-ness' is not just our passport into the Normal Christian Life – it is far more than that. In the poem, The Master says to the broken pot (now at least partly mended, and – if you like – re-born), 'There's work you must do! Just pour out to others as I pour into you.'

That puts a different perspective on what we might think of as our 'damaged' lives. It means that those 'cracks' in the pot are not there to be whinged about! – they're there to be used! – and used, especially, to help other people who are 'going through the mill'!

Here is a little story which is very much to the point:

An elderly Chinese woman (in another version, an Indian man!) had two large pots, each hung on the ends of a pole which she carried across her neck. One of the pots had a crack in it while the other pot was perfect and always delivered a full portion of water. At the end of the long walks from the stream to the house, the cracked pot arrived only half full. For a full two years this went on daily, with the woman bringing home only one and a half pots of water. Of course, the perfect pot was proud of its accomplishments. But the poor cracked pot was ashamed of its own imperfection, and miserable that it could only do half of what it had been made to do. After two years of what it perceived to be bitter failure, it spoke to the woman one day by the stream. 'I am ashamed of myself, because this crack in my side causes water to leak out all the way back to your house.'

The old woman smiled, 'Did you notice that there are flowers on your side of the path, but not on the other pot's side?'

'That's because I have always known about your flaw, so I planted flower seeds on your side of the path, and every day while we walk back, you water them. For two years I have been able to pick these beautiful flowers to decorate the table. Without you being just the way you are, there would not be this beauty to grace the house.'

Each of us has our own unique flaw. But it's the cracks and flaws we each have that make our lives together so very interesting and rewarding. You've just got to take each person for what they are and look for the good in them.

So, to all of my cracked pot friends, have a great day and remember to smell the flowers on your side of the path!

Cracked and broken things do have a real value. Think of that 'alabaster box of ointment', broken to release a beautiful perfume, which filled the whole house. Think of the chorus of a familiar old hymn: *'O to be nothing, nothing, only to lie at his feet, A broken and emptied vessel, for the Master's use made meet!'*

And think of Joseph, for a moment. Like Jeremiah, Joseph had much to put up with: sold into slavery by his brothers, wrongly accused by Potiphar's wife and imprisoned for years. But he emerged from his experiences victorious, and ready to do God's work.

This is from Genesis chapter 41: *'Joseph was thirty years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh king of Egypt. And Joseph went out from Pharaoh's presence and travelled throughout Egypt. During the seven years of abundance, the land produced plentifully. Joseph collected all the food produced in those seven years of abundance in Egypt and stored it in the cities. In each city he put the food grown in the fields surrounding it. Joseph stored up huge quantities of grain, like the sand of the sea; it was beyond measure.'*

The account goes on, *'Before the years of famine came, two sons were born to Joseph by Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On. Joseph named his firstborn Manasseh and said, "It is because God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father's household." The second son he named Ephraim and said, "It is because God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering."* Think about that, for a moment – *'He made me fruitful in the land of my suffering'*.

I mentioned Margot, earlier. She died of cancer in 1985, three months after we'd celebrated our Silver Wedding. She had a natural gift for talking to people who were in need of help and comfort. After she died, I looked through the little address-book that she kept in her handbag, and it was full of names and addresses of people I'd never heard of. People whom she'd met just once, probably. People who'd talked to her – on a train – on a bus – and who, I expect, had never forgotten the experience.

Occasionally, since Margot's death, I too have had the chance to talk to people who've recently experienced bereavement, and – if it's seemed right at the time – I've tried to share with them a bit of my own experience. I suppose, in the Chinese story we heard, that's a bit like letting water trickle out through the cracks, and then finding that you've watered the flowers.

I don't know whether what I shared was helpful to them or not – but that's not really the point, is it. That part we can safely leave with God. I suppose what I'm really saying is – you don't have to be a 'trained counsellor' to help people in need. I've nothing against 'trained counsellors', and they undoubtedly help many people to sort themselves out, but the Apostles weren't

'trained counsellors' – except in the sense that they received their training from watching Jesus at work, and (later on, after Pentecost) from the effects of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

So – don't worry about the 'cracks' – use them! As Margot used to say, 'We always need to remember that we're all just 'little clay pots'. Crack-pots? – well, maybe! Damaged goods? – very probably! We're human – we have our limitations.

Paul had no illusions about his limitations. *'We have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.'* ... and then, he supplies the reason for his victorious life: *'We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in us.'*

In the same letter, Paul writes, *'Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort that we ourselves have received from God.'*

Peter, in his first Letter, talks about *'a living hope, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you. ... In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith ... may be proved genuine, and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.'* And Peter's final conclusion is that *'those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator, and should continue to do good.'*

That 'little clay pot' that Jeremiah saw being made 'was marred in the hand of the potter', but it was remade into what Mother Teresa called 'Something beautiful for God'.

We all experience times of difficulty in our lives, and they can be hard to endure, but we gradually come to realise that it's only through those really hard times that we grow – just as the chrysalis can never develop into the beautiful butterfly without the terrible struggle which pumps blood into its wings, and helps it to unfold them.

'Little clay pots' do get chipped and cracked – broken, even, sometimes. As I suggested earlier, many of us have been through difficult experiences – physically, emotionally – maybe both. In a TV programme like the *Antiques Roadshow* sometimes one of the experts on the show will look at an old pot, and say, "Well, over the years it's suffered some damage, you know. If it were perfect, I'd expect it to make a couple of thousand pounds, at auction! As it is now, it's only worth a few hundred, I'm afraid. But, you know, a good craftsman could restore it for you, so that you wouldn't know it was ever damaged!"

Take heart, little clay pots! What *you* need is a good restorer! – a Restorer with a Capital 'R' – and I know just the Expert Craftsman: our Loving Heavenly Father! God loves us – every one of us! – he knows what we're going through, and he's going through it with us.

A famous nineteenth century Bishop of Durham, Bishop Handley Moule, wrote, 'There is no situation so chaotic that God cannot, from that very situation, create something which is surpassingly good. He did it at the creation. He did it at the cross. He is doing it still today.'

A morning prayer based on words by Bishop Moule reads like this:

Lord, be with us

Jesus, Son of God, we believe in you, so you include us in your love.

We are saved by the life you gave. Your Spirit makes us live.

We are part of you, and you are part of us. We are full of your life and of your love.

We belong to you – you deserve to have our lives and to change them. We give ourselves to you.

You belong to us – there is no cloud in between. You give us all we need, each hour.

We have no problem, inside us or outside, which you cannot meet today.

You are our Keeper, Lord.

Now isn't that lovely!

Remember the hymn, written by John Newton, the reformed slave-master: *'How sweet the name of Jesus sounds in a believer's ear. It soothes his sorrows, heals his wounds, and drives away his fear.'*

Remember too what Paul wrote to his friends in Corinth: *'Therefore we don't lose heart. Though outwardly we're wasting away, yet inwardly we're being renewed, day by day.'*

My present wife Kate has drawn my attention to some lovely words on a calendar-reading, back in January. I've discovered that they form the last verse of a hymn written by Robert Cleaver Chapman:

*'Thou art the Potter, we the clay,
Thy will be ours, Thy truth our light,
Thy love the fountain of our joy,
Thine arm a safeguard day and night,
Till Thou shalt wipe all tears away,
And bring forth everlasting day.'*

B K-S

ALPHABET OF PRAYER

ASKING: Ask and you will receive, knock and it will be opened to you. For everyone that asks receives, and he who seeks finds. Mt. 7:7-11

BLESSING: With the tongue we bless God (and curse man). Out of the same mouth come blessing and cursing. Jas 3:9.

CONFESSING: If we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 1 John 1:9.

DESIRE: When you pray, what things you desire, believe that you receive them and you will have them. Mk 11:24.

ENQUIRY: I will be enquired of by Israel (to fulfil His promises) Ezek.36:37 Lord what wilt thou have me do?

FASTING: Anna...served God with fastings and prayers night and day... gave thanks unto God and spoke of Him to all that looked... Lu 2:37.

GRIEVING: For the grieving of the needy, now will I arise, says the Lord. Psa 12:5.

HEARING: My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me. John 10:27.

INTERCESSION: Supplication, prayer, intercession and thanksgiving for all men, kings, all in authority, that we may lead a quiet life. 1 Tim 2:1.

JOY: In every prayer of mine for you all making request with joy, for your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now. Phil 1:4.

KNEELING: Jesus kneeled and prayed in Gethsemane. Mt 26:39.

Stephen kneeled and cried, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. Acts 7:60.

LISTENING: Whether it is right to listen to you rather than God, judge ye. Acts 4:9.

MESSAGES: Paul was told by Jesus to go into Damascus. Acts 9:6.

Peter was told to go with the three men Cornelius sent. Acts 10:19-20.

NEEDS: My God shall supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus Phil 4:19

Ask and it shall be given to you Mt 7:7.

OPENNESS: Lydia worshipped God; whose heart the Lord opened; Acts 16:14.

The two disciples' eyes were opened; and they recognised him. Lu 24:31.

PENITENCE: Godly sorrow works repentance to salvation, not to be repented of. 2 Cor 7:9-11.

God's goodness leads to repentance. Rom 2:4.

QUESTIONING: "Lord, what will you have me to do?" (Paul) Acts 9:6
All men mused as to whether John were the Christ. Lu 3:15-16.

REMEMBERING: I thank God at every remembrance of you. Phil 1:3.

Remember those in prison and those bound with them. Heb 13:3.

SINGING: Singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. Col 3:16.
 Psalms, hymns, songs, making melody in your hearts to the Lord. Eph 5:19.
 THANKSGIVING: Giving thanks always for all things unto our God and
 Father. Eph 5:20.
 In everything give thanks 1 Thes 5:18
 UNDERSTANDING: I will pray with the understanding also. 1 Cor 14:15.
 Lest they should see...hear...understand...and be converted. Act 28:17.
 VOWS: I will pay my vows to the Lord now in the presence of all His
 people. Psa 22:25.
 WATCHING: Continue in prayer and watch in it with thanksgiving. Col 4:2.
 I will stand on my watch to see what He will say to me. Hab 2:1.
 'XTOLLING: I will extol you, for you have lifted me up. Psa 30:1.
 Exalt the Lord our God and worship at His footstool, He is holy. Psa 99:5.
 YEARNING: With open mouth I yearn for your commands. Psa 119:131.
 ZEAL: Epaphras has great zeal for you and them in Laodicea... Col 4:12.
 The zeal of Thine house hath eaten me up. Psa 69:9.
Found among some old papers. Thanks to the unknown writer

RUTH THE MOABITESS

One of the most appealing stories in the Bible is that of Ruth the alien whose love for her deceased husband and her husband's mother led her to forsake her own land and her own gods to share that mother's life in the land of Israel and serve the God of Israel. The narrative is an exquisite cameo of Israel's occupancy of the Promised Land immediately after the Conquest. It is eloquent, not so much for what it does say, as what it does not say, and what can be read between the lines. It is built around what is called the Levirate law, and is the most complete exposition of the operation of that law which the Bible contains; to understand the story aright it is necessary to know something about the law.

Moses the Lawgiver had included in the Law given at Sinai a provision to cater for the position created when a man died childless, and no heir was left to inherit his holding in the land. The arrangement was intended and suited only for the primitive form of agricultural community which was to be Israel's lot for quite a few centuries following the Conquest. It is presupposed that in most families where a relatively young husband died, there would be younger unmarried brothers, and it provided that when this eventuality arose one of the brothers should marry the widow, the first child of the marriage being counted the child of the dead man and lawful heir to his estate. It is not clear what

happened if the remaining brothers were all married, but since the Mosaic Law did not preclude a man from having two wives, as such unions were not unknown, it may be that no difficulty existed. In later times it seems that any available near relative could assume the obligation and this appears to have been the case in this instance.

The scene of the story as it is related in the Book of Ruth is set partly in Judah and partly in the adjoining land of Moab on the other side of the Dead Sea. The period was during the century immediately following Israel's entry into the land and soon after the death of Joshua. Precise dating is questionable but casual allusions in the story do make it possible to construct a possible framework which is probably true within ten years or so either way.

Elimelech, of the tribe of Judah and closely related to Salmon the founder of Bethlehem – probably his cousin – lived with his wife Naomi and two young sons in the district of Bethlehem. The land was smitten by famine and the family emigrated to the country of Moab some hundred miles away and settled there; before long Elimelech died and left Naomi with the two boys, by now growing into manhood. They both married Moabitish girls and the family settled down; the sons were more Moabite than Israelite in sympathies and it seems there was no question of a return to Judah. Then, unexpectedly, both sons died, still young, probably while still in their twenties, and Naomi was left alone with her daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth.

This is where the action of the story begins. Naomi decided at once to return to Judah. The inference is that the decision to go to Moab was Elimelech's and that Naomi had accompanied him only because of duty; her heart remained in the land of Divine promise. Her character as presented in the story is that of a reverent, trustful woman of faith. The fact that her husband had willingly abandoned the land which his people had laboured and suffered forty years in the wilderness to attain, ignoring the promise God had made respecting the material prosperity which would be the lot of Israel whilst they retained loyalty to him, shows that he was probably one of those who at this very time, after Joshua's death "*forsook the Lord God of their fathers, which brought them out of the land of Egypt*" (Jud. 2. 12). It was this apostasy which brought upon Israel their first great disaster, the famine, and the invasion and oppression of Chushan-Rishathaim, the ruler of Aram-Naharaim, who they served eight years until Othniel arose and delivered them (Jud. 3. 8-9). Naomi's decision to return was strengthened by the news from Judah that "*the Lord had visited his people in giving them bread.*" (Ruth 1. 6) and when she arrived she found a plentiful harvest in full swing; this, under the provisions of the Mosaic covenant, could only mean that the people had repented of their apostasy and re-affirmed their loyalty to God so that her

return must have been in the early years of Othniel's leadership and their stay in Moab coincident with the time of the invasion and oppression.

Naomi could see no future in Judah for the two girls. She advised – even entreated – them to leave her and find other husbands of their own people. Orpah took her advice and went back; Ruth refused to do so. In words of compelling beauty, some of the most beautiful in the Old Testament, she affirmed her resolve to stay with the older woman, come what may. Judah was a strange land to her, Judah's God an unknown God, but she would accept both in her love for her dead husband's mother. *“Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee; for whither thou goest, I will go; whither thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God. Where thou diest, I will die, and there will I be buried. The Lord do so to me, and more also, if aught but death part thee and me.”* (Ruth 1. 16-17). And so Ruth came to Bethlehem.

They arrived destitute. What possessions they did have had been left behind in Moab. An ass, on which the older woman rode, a few clothes and one or two pots and pans probably constituted their worldly wealth. For shelter they most likely found an abandoned cottage in which they settled down to face the future. Naomi still possessed her legal right to the family plot of land which they had left to go to Moab; it was probably being farmed by someone else in her absence but it would be restored to her after the next harvest without question. With no menfolk to work it the land was only a liability. Naomi was herself too old to work. Ruth took the initiative; she was to be the breadwinner, and she proposed as a first step to go gleaning in one of the harvest fields to acquire some store of grain for their immediate subsistence. The Mosaic Law required all farmers to leave the corners of their fields unreaped with liberty for the needy to glean it at will. By means of hard work Ruth would be able to gather a sufficiency for their immediate needs. There is no hint of reluctance or complaint; willingly she had elected to share Naomi's life and fortunes and if, in the lack of a husband, this meant what it always did in such a society, poverty and hardship, Ruth accepted the position with serenity and quietness of mind. To what extent, at this stage, she looked to the God of Israel for guidance and help it is not possible to say from the story; probably that came later as she became more accustomed to the ways of Israel.

Nevertheless God was not unmindful. Of all the farmers in whose fields she might conceivably find herself gleaning, *“her hap”* says the narrative *“was to light on a part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the kindred of Elimelech”*. By an overruling providence of God, we must be sure, she had been guided to the man who had both power and will to help them in their plight. Boaz was a son of Salmon, who entered the land with Joshua, married Rahab of Jericho, and was the most important man in the community. Boaz

himself was "*a mighty man of wealth*", but not only so, he was also an upright and God-fearing man and respected by his employees. Coming into the field in which Ruth was working he saluted his men with the greeting "*The Lord be with you*" to which they responded "*the Lord bless thee*". It is easy to see that here was a man who did not run away to Moab or anywhere else when famine and invasion afflicted the land; he stood his ground and maintained his loyalty to God and now, in consequence, as the Mosaic Law promised, he was prosperous and secure.

It was not long before Boaz noticed the stranger gleaning so industriously in his field and enquired her identity. The Hebrew term he used – rendered "damsel" in the A.V. - indicates that Ruth, although a widow, was still in her twenties, and it is obvious that he looked on her with more than passing interest. The fact that she was a Moabitess, of an alien race upon which the Israelites normally looked with distaste and enmity, weighed nothing with Boaz against the fact that she had willingly entered the commonwealth of Israel. He had evidently heard her story: "*It hath fully been shown me*" he told her gently "*all that thou hast done to thy mother-in-law since the death of thine husband: and how thou hast left thy father and thy mother, and the land of thy nativity, and art come unto a people which thou knewest not heretofore. The Lord recompense thy work, and a full reward be given thee of the Lord God of Israel, under whose wings thou art come to trust*". Boaz' own mother, Rahab of Jericho, was an alien likewise accepted into Israel; this fact may well have inclined him to sympathy for the woman standing before him. Doubtless conscious of the many injunctions of the Mosaic Law concerning treatment of the "*stranger that is within thy gates*", he gave instructions that Ruth's presence among his reapers was to be respected and her gleaning facilitated, enjoining her to remain in his own fields in the company of his women servants, and so left her. He even went so far as to instruct his workers to allow her to glean from the standing sheaves, and to let fall reaped corn purposely to give her the richer gathering. Human nature being what it is, there is not much doubt that the reapers, perceiving their master's interest in this young stranger, assisted her with a will, so that by the end of the day Ruth had gathered and threshed out for herself some five gallons of ripe barley.

So passed some three months, from April to early July, whilst the barley harvest ran its course and was followed by wheat harvest. Ruth gleaned assiduously every day and went home every night to her mother-in-law. Naomi is not likely to have been idle all this time; she may have found some means of contributing a little to the family income, and in any case she would be re-establishing herself as a member of the community. She also had an important matter to think about – Ruth's future. Without much doubt she first wanted to satisfy herself that Ruth would not change her mind and return,

after all, to the easier life in Moab, where she still apparently possessed living parents. That decided, she must then set in motion the processes of the Levirate Law which would both secure a husband for her daughter-in-law and settle the question of the landed estate which had been the property of her sons and would now pass to her daughter-in-law's first son.

It must have been a cause of considerable gratification to the older woman when she concluded, from her knowledge, so far as it went, of the ramifications of her husband's family tree, that the nearest surviving relative of the dead Mahlon, the one therefore who must act as the *gaal*, to marry Ruth and raise up a son to Mahlon, was none other than the wealthy and evidently very likeable Boaz. With his known loyalty to the Mosaic Law there would be no doubt as to his concurrence, and in any case his personal interest in Ruth must by now have become general knowledge in the community so that Naomi might well have begun to feel that a happy solution to all her problems was in sight.

So she instructed Ruth in the manner she must make the customary formal approach to claim the benefit of the Law. The third chapter of the Book tells the story, how that Ruth adorned herself in her best raiment and joined Boaz in the threshing barn where he was finishing the day's work with his reapers. There, when all had composed themselves to rest and the others were all asleep, she made her plea, and Boaz listened. What were his feelings at that moment we do not know, for they are not recorded, but what he had to say to her was in all probability a crushing blow to her hopes as well as to his. Gladly, he said, would he have done as she desired, but - "*it is true that I am thy near kinsman; howbeit there is a kinsman nearer than I*". An unknown stranger had the right to take Ruth and to him must she bear the son who would take the inheritance. Perhaps that was the moment when Ruth's determination to remain a child of Israel, with all the obligation it might entail, was put to its severest test. That she passed the test and emerged triumphant is evinced by the fact that the matter proceeded according to law, and the unknown kinsman was brought upon the scene. "*Tarry this night*" said Boaz gently "*and it shall be in the morning, that if he will perform the part of a kinsman unto thee, well: let him do the kinsman's part; but if he will not do the part of a kinsman to thee, then will I do the part of a kinsman to thee, as the Lord liveth; lie down until the morning.*"

The identity of the kinsman is shrouded in a certain obscurity. His name is not given. This in the O.T. narratives usually means that the one concerned is an irreligious or apostate character and not worthy of record; the omission of the man's name is a mute condemnation. This kinsman was certainly irreligious for in the end he flatly refused to do his bounden duty. Boaz had lost no time in convening a court of the elders of Bethlehem before whom the case had to be heard, and securing the attendance of the kinsman. That worthy

evidently failed to realise the implications of the matter, for upon hearing that family land standing in the name of the two deceased sons of Elimelech was awaiting a claimant he promptly entered his claim. Upon learning, however, that part of the contract was to marry Ruth so that the land might pass to her son and not to himself after all he hurriedly washed his hands of the whole affair. "*I cannot redeem*" he said "*lest I mar mine own inheritance*" and then, perhaps a trifle maliciously, to Boaz "*redeem thou my right to thyself; for I cannot redeem it.*" The ground of his refusal is not immediately self-explanatory but it may well have been a fear that this woman who was childless after a term of marriage to Mahlon might fail to give him a son and succeed to his own land, and so his inheritance would fall into the same condition as the deceased Mahlon's. At any rate, Mosaic Law or no Mosaic Law, he wanted nothing to do with it.

So Boaz married Ruth, and of their descendants was born some two hundred and fifty years later David, king of Israel; and a thousand years after that, Jesus, the son of Mary. The story of Ruth the Moabitess probably owes its inclusion in the Bible to that fact, but being thus included it remains an eloquent testimony to the far-reaching consequences of the love and faith displayed by this alien girl who embraced the obligations and privileges of the commonwealth of Israel in full assurance that God would receive her.

AOH

MOVING TENT

"I saw the tent, which was over me one moment, leveled with the ground the next, and in a few minutes it was stored on the back of a pack-mule to be carried off. When it had been removed, no trace remained of its ever having been there." This was the experience of Cunningham Geikie when he traveled in Palestine 150 years ago, traveling in deserted country with his Arab guides as he studied the lands of the Bible. His experience could in some ways be paralleled in 2012, when ordinary holidaymakers compactly stow away their lightweight plastic tents, and drive off in their cars, leaving no sign of their overnight stay - unless it be a patch of dry ground, or, God forbid, litter. Tents are temporary dwellings, a picture perhaps of fleeting human life.

Tents are what make possible the nomadic lifestyle. Jabal, son of Adah, grandson of Methuselah, was said to be "father of those who dwell in

tents and have cattle” (Genesis 4.20). Tent dwelling persisted - Noah, even though a cultivator of the soil, lived in a tent (Genesis 9.21). Abraham as he migrated with his flocks from place to place had his tent by the oaks of Mamre when the Lord appeared to him (Genesis 18.1). Isaac in the Negeb welcomed Rebekah to the tent (24.67). Laban (31.33) searched Jacob’s tents for stolen property.

Later, when the Israelites were en route from Egypt to Canaan they necessarily lived in tents, which were presumably made of black goatskins draped over supports. (Paul, a thousand years on, would have understood the details of this - he was a tent-maker Acts 18.3.) The collection of manna in the wilderness was organised on the basis of tent occupancy, you had to collect an amount proportionate to the number of occupants of your tent (Exodus 16.16).

The most important tent among them was one pitched by Moses, away from the camp. He called it the Tent of Meeting. Anyone who had to consult Yahweh would go out to the Tent of Meeting, outside the camp. Whenever Moses went out to the Tent, all the people would rise. Every man would stand at the door of his tent and watch Moses until he reached the Tent. The pillar of cloud would come down and station itself at the entrance to the Tent, and Yahweh would speak with Moses. When they saw the pillar of cloud stationed at the entrance to the Tent, all the people would rise and bow low, each at the door of his tent. Yahweh would speak with Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend. Then Moses would turn back to the camp, but the young man who was his servant, Joshua son of Nun, would not leave the Tent (Exodus 33.7-11). This tent door meeting of God with Moses must have been like his experience when he was placed ‘in the cleft of the rock’ (Exodus 34.22-3). Elijah, 300 years on, stood in the mouth of a cave for God to speak to him (1 Kings 19.9-18).

When the Tabernacle had been made, a greatly more elaborate tent of meeting, it was erected in the midst of their camp, and the cloud and glory rested inside it. But even the Tabernacle would be dismantled, and all the people would move on. And God’s presence went with them.

In the book of Job, when Eliphaz the Temanite is discoursing about how mankind die, he uses the metaphor of a tent collapsing. *“If their tent cord is plucked up within them, do they not die?...”* (Job 4.21). Paul in 2 Corinthians 5 uses the same comparison at greater length. He has been telling how his ministry as an apostle results in suffering, but that in Jesus there is new life and resurrection. *“So do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.”* The sufferings are slight, compared with the weight of glory in store. We must fix our eyes on the unseen things. *“For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands,*

eternal in the heavens.” It is a ‘heavenly dwelling’ which will clothe us when the ‘tent’ has been taken down.

Peter had the same thought. He had been urging believers to live up to their calling, and was not ashamed to be reminding them. *“I think it right, as long as I am in this tent, to arouse you by way of reminder, since I know that the putting off of my tent will be soon as our Lord Jesus Christ has showed me.”* He wanted to be sure that they remembered his teaching when he was gone (2 Peter 1).

We should not of course think that a tent in scripture always means something temporary. Jesus in Luke 16 speaks of wealth being temporary, success being temporary, the power of money something that fails, but, he says, live in such a way among these transitory things that you get a welcome into the *eternal tents*. Tents can mean home. A tent can be the place to meet a victorious general. Jesus wants us to aim for a permanent home and a permanent welcome.

The writer to the Hebrews does not seem to have a high opinion of the life of a tent-dwelling nomad. Part of Abraham’s faith was to look beyond his life in tents: *“He looked forward to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God”* (Hebrews 11.10). Abraham lived as a stranger and as an exile, desiring a better, a heavenly country. God has prepared for all men of faith a city - *“But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to a judge who is God of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks more graciously than the blood of Abel”* (Hebrews 12.22-4).

This city can be described as the place where God has *his* tent. The foretaste was when Christ came. *“The Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us. And we saw his glory, glory as the only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth”* (John 1.14). In John’s vision of Revelation 7 there is a *“huge crowd, too many to count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and the Lamb crying ‘Victory to God and the Lamb’. They had come from the great trouble. Their clothes are washed clean with the Lamb’s blood. The One sitting on the throne will pitch his tent with them. They shall not hunger and thirst any more; the sun shall not fall upon them, nor any burning heat, because the Lamb that is in the middle of the throne shall shepherd them, and shall guide them to streams of living waters, and God shall wipe away every tear from their eyes.”* (Revelation 7.13-17). This is God among his own special people. In Revelation 21 it goes further. The Holy City comes down out of heaven from God, dressed like a bride. *“And I heard a mighty voice from the Throne saying, ‘Look! God’s tent is with human beings; and God will pitch his tent*

with them; and they shall be his peoples, and God himself will be with them as their God. And he will wipe away every tear from their eyes. And Death shall be no more; and sadness, and crying, and pain shall be no more - for the former things have gone.' And the One sitting on the throne said, 'Look! I am making all things new.'" (Revelation 21.3-5 King). So God's tent is pitched among mankind with permanent glorious consequences.

At the present we are living our lives, poised between the temporary and the permanent. However settled life may be for us, we need to remember that 'all good things come to an end', and that as of now we do not possess a continuing city. From God's perspective we are like tent dwellers, who after a little stay upon earth must pack up and move on. He has of course prepared a permanent home for us. That home gains its essential character in that God pitches His tent there, dwells with us. But for now, as we journey we are in a world of temporary things, through which we need to travel in the right direction. As an old hymn puts it,

*For ever with the Lord!
Amen, so let it be.
Life from the dead is in that word,
'Tis immortality.
Here in the body pent
Absent from Him I roam,
Yet nightly pitch my moving tent
A day's march nearer home.*

GC

RESURRECTION HOPE

'Resurrection' does not mean 'going to heaven when you die'. It isn't about 'life after death'. It's about life *after* 'life after death'. You die; you go to be 'with Christ' ('life after death'), but your body remains dead. Describing where and what you are in that interim period is difficult, and the New Testament writers mostly don't try. Call it 'heaven' if you like, but don't imagine it's the end of all things. What is promised *after* that interim period is a new bodily life within God's new world (life *after* life after death).

I am constantly amazed that many contemporary Christians find this confusing. It was second nature to the early church and to many subsequent Christian generations. It was what they believed and taught. If we have grown up believing and teaching something else, it's time we rubbed our eyes and read our texts again. God's plan is not to abandon this world, the world of

which he said that it was 'very good'. He intends to remake it. And when he does, he will raise all his people to new *bodily* life to live in it. That is the promise of the Christian gospel.

To live in it, yes; and also to rule over it. There is a mystery here which few today have even begun to ponder. Both Paul and Revelation stress that in God's new world those who belong to the Messiah will be placed in charge. The first creation was put into the care of God's image-bearing creatures. The new creation will be put into the care, the wise, healing stewardship of those who have been 'renewed according to the image of the creator', as Paul puts it.

In God's new world, of course, Jesus himself will be the central figure. That's why from the beginning the church has always spoken of his 'second coming', though in terms of the overlap of heaven and earth it would be more appropriate to speak, as some early Christians also did, of the 'reappearing' of Jesus. He is, at the moment, present with us, but hidden behind that invisible veil that keeps heaven and earth apart, and which we pierce in those moments, such as prayer, the sacraments, the reading of scripture and our work with the poor, where the veil seems particularly thin. But one day the veil will be lifted; earth and heaven will be one; Jesus will be personally present, and every knee shall bow at his name; creation will be renewed; the dead will be raised; and God's new world will at last be in place, full of new prospects and possibilities. This is what the Christian vision of salvation... is all about.

Tom Wright in 'Simply Christian'

PETER MENTIONS MANY-SIDED GRACE

There were Jews living in Jerusalem who had come there from all parts of the world. Among them were some from northern Turkey (as we know it today), namely the provinces of Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia. At the feast of Pentecost they were among those who heard the good news of Jesus each in his own language. They were there when Peter spoke out so boldly: "*Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs which God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know - this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. But God raised him up, having loosed the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it..... Let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.*" (Acts 2.22-4, 36).

Thirty years later Peter was writing a letter to Jewish believers in that

area - perhaps even some of the same people who had been there at Pentecost - in conformity with his agreement with Paul that he should go primarily to the Jews while Paul took the good news to the Gentiles. Imagine Peter, settled now in Rome (which they referred to as Babylon!) He was aware that troubles were about to descend on the Christian community. The persecution under the Emperor Nero was imminent - so was Peter's death. Knowing that they were likely to be punished simply for being Christian, Peter writes to encourage the believers. Silas, who had been with Paul, helps him to get it written down, and then perhaps acts as his messenger. We can think of the letter being taken by ship to the coast of Pontus on the Black Sea. Then it would be carried from church to church in a wide circuit through all the provinces, Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and back to the sea in Bithynia.

At each church Peter's encouragement and warnings would be read out. We too can read them, in 1 Peter. It was evident to Peter that 'we are near the end of all things now' (4.7). The goal toward which God is working had nearly been reached. Because of this he mentions some essentials for their lives.

The first essential was to be 'calm self-controlled men of prayer' (Phillips). 'Keep your heads and be sober for your prayers' (King). Prayer is indeed the first essential. The Christian's aim in the midst of fears and uncertainties must be to keep in touch with God.

The second essential is to have love for one another, a real deep love, an eager love. True love will overlook a neighbour's faults. It is God's love for us which covers our sins. Love is the quintessential quality of a truly Christian community.

Thirdly, this love issues in hospitality. The community under stress of persecution needs to hang together. Those who lost their homes needed a shelter. Traveling ministers needed the same. A welcome must be real, not grudging.

Fourthly, whatever gifts God has given them, they are to use to the full. Preachers should speak God's message with conviction and authority, while those with practical abilities should realise that these come from God, and they must use them so that God may get the credit.

This position of being a steward of what God has given, this sharing out to all, is significant. Modern English versions put it in various ways: be good stewards... efficient stewards... good managers, not just passing on God's grace but taking a grip on what we are doing for him. Passing God's gift around, so that all may have a share. Faithful dispensers - like chemists who hand out from their remedies in stock just what is needed.

Note what is passed on, it is God's gifts, his grace. It is the talents and

the possessions which come from Him in his love, kindness and grace. These gifts are wonderfully varied.

His grace is many-sided, multi-coloured even. The Greek word is *poikilos*, and it might conjure up images for Peter's readers. God's grace is like the vivid pattern of a leopard's skin, like the sheen of a bird's plumage, like cloth woven from many different coloured threads. Like cunning metalwork on a shield. His grace operates like a person who has many sides to his character, is astute to see more than what is plain and obvious, and so can cope with any emergency.

The church has always depended on God's grace, which is shown in his gift of servants to serve the body and in his gift of abilities to equip those servants. But over and beyond this, his grace extends in a multi-coloured, multi-faceted way to meet every one of our needs.

As Peter assured the believers in those provinces so long ago, if we will stand fast against whatever is thrown at us in life, God will stand fast with us. In his grace.

"So, humble yourselves under God's strong hand, and in his own time he will lift you up"... *"throwing all your cares on God, because God is concerned for you."*

GC

ONE WITH CHRIST AND EACH OTHER

"That they all may be one as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us; that the world may believe that thou hast sent me." (Jon. 17.21).

When you consecrated your life to the Lord, dear brother or sister, no doubt it was with rather mixed feelings. You surveyed the world of opportunities around you, counting the flowing, interesting little streams of life; perhaps you could see a strongly moving river inviting you to plunge in and be taken up with its progress. But you loved your Lord, because He first loved you, and you sought unity with him in word, deed and character. As you progressed in the Christian life, you came to see that the little stream led to the strong river, erratic, eddying perhaps, which relentlessly, following out a natural law, flowed down to the sea. Not a peaceful ocean, but a sea in which tempests were imminent, which could become a thunderous, raging maelstrom.

Although not *of* the world, we are still very much *in* it, which we may

find distressing, the natural man being what he is. As the experiences of the day tend to make us feel more and more our separateness from the world we can look up with great encouragement. At first our allegiance to Christ and the pursuing of his principles of loving self-sacrifice only affected our home and social life; now it is affecting our civil and business life, so that in many cases we must choose to plough a comparatively lonely furrow rather than follow the line of least resistance with the crowd. This is separating...separating...separating...and a good thing too! How much more eagerly we turn to the Lord in prayer; how much tighter we grasp his outstretched hand; how much more we understand and reciprocate the warmth of the brethren's love. And does not the Father rejoice with us as He sees us easing away from the materialism around us? What awe-inspiring wonder there is in our calling! What a high, what a glorious, lofty calling is ours!

As we separate from the things that do not matter, we find a wholesome, satisfying peace in our unity with each other and with Jesus. As we, as his Church, gravitate to him as our Head, let us do what we can to draw the bonds of love a little closer round each other. The Apostle Paul, that apt channel of the Holy Spirit, teaches us on this point in Ephesians 4.

"I... beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace..."

It becomes less difficult to walk with all lowliness and meekness when we consider the calling with which we are called. The gentle, patient, forbearing brother or sister is an invaluable asset in the preservation of unity between one another. *"Forbearing one another in love, endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace."* Just as Jesus did! How our thoughts rise in leaps and bounds as we remember his forbearance in love, his great, earnest desire for us to be one in him, and the bond of perfect peace which He left us as a legacy.

It is clear from Paul's words that our unity does not find its roots in the particular body we belong to, in our activities together, or even in the way we understand the truth. Our unity is as Christ's body (the Church), in spirit and in hope, in our Lord, our faith and our baptism, and in the one omnipotent Father. The Apostle seems to show us that our unity as a Church to some extent depends upon each individual fitting in to that part of the Lord's service for which he is most gifted. *"He gave some, apostles..."* etc. Let us be frank with ourselves. Am I trying to do too much in activities for which I am not suited? What talents have I? Are my talents being used in worldly affairs which could be turned to 'the perfecting of the saints'? It is an important matter, for the building up of the body of Christ is involved. We must think very prayerfully and carefully with the Holy Spirit's guidance as we act in

such holy service. A sincere prayer is more effective than trying to work out a line of procedure, and we need to see what the consecration of our lives implies.

The Apostle teaches us to forbear in love, speak the truth in love, for the building up of the body in love. He would have us see that this is all part of our “unfeigned love” one to another, and we know in practice that our mutual love is our unity. Our Lord's great love for us, and our devoted love for him, makes our unity, and, as Paul points out in another epistle, what can separate us?

Whilst at a convention once I heard the chairman use the expression “Let us unite in prayer”. I was profoundly moved as about a hundred of us quietly and simply united in the one desire to commune with the Father. It meant that all those sincere minds were concentrated on the one high purpose, and coming from a world where man's hand was turned against his neighbour the thought was impressively beautiful. We were children together, at home with each other, speaking reverently to our Father, and the spirit of peace and love prevailed.

This unity we gain this side of the Veil. *Do others gain it too?*

BSM 1967

TWENTY ANSWERS

Test your Bible knowledge about these people

- 1 What is the other name of Tabitha?
- 2 Who fell out with Syntyche?
- 3 Name the woman believer at Athens who listened to Paul
- 4 Who said “Seeing that by thee we enjoy great quietness, and that very worthy deeds are done unto this nation by thy providence...?”
- 5 to 8 Name **four** New Testament characters whose names begin ‘Bar’
- 9 to 11 Who was Ananias? (**3 different answers**, please)
- 12 to 20 Name **nine** different New Testament people who were called ‘Simon’

Answers and references on page 159.

THE FIRST PSALM

An Exposition

The First Psalm serves as an introduction to the Book of Psalms. It is peculiarly fitted to introduce the sublime thoughts of later psalms, for it speaks of righteousness and evil and Divine Law. These three themes are at the centre of revealed truth, and a clear understanding of them is an indispensable preliminary to the intelligent consideration and reception of the "deep things of God" (1 Cor. 2. 10).

Although the Psalms are commonly attributed to David, it is clear that he was not the author of them all. Some belong to later times, up to the days of Hezekiah at least, and a few to earlier days, but David was certainly responsible for most of them, and he it was who began the collection, to which others were added from time to time in later days, resulting in the Book of Psalms as we now have it.

There is little internal evidence to suggest who wrote this First Psalm. The occurrence of the word "*luts*" for "*scornful*", a word which occurs only once again in the Psalms, but is of frequent occurrence in the Book of Proverbs, is thought to point to the time of Solomon, and the general tone of the Psalm is certainly reminiscent of Solomon's analytical and intellectual mind more than of the frank devotion and picturesque expressiveness of David. But the authorship is not of importance, for it is the Psalm itself that is of value.

The purpose of this Psalm is to declare the fundamental principle upon which God has designed His creation, namely, that those things which are right, just, in harmony with His own character, shall endure for ever; and that which is evil, unjust, out of harmony with the character of God, although it may subsist for a time, must and will inevitably pass out of existence. Divine creation is so ordained that nothing which is inherently evil can subsist indefinitely. It contains within itself the seeds of its own destruction and must eventually come to its end. Hence we have the law propounded by Paul in Rom. 6. 23 "The wages of sin is death" —death being the antithesis of life, the opposite to conscious existence.

The Psalm praises the happy state of the righteous man, both now and hereafter, and attributes the maintenance of his righteous state to his observance of Divine Law. Against this it places in contrast the unhappy position of the sinful, and declares in no uncertain terms that the end of that way is desolation, oblivion, non-existence. The fact that God's whole plan of development for man is based upon law is stressed, and rightly stressed, here. [It is when this fact is realised that we find ready to our hands a yardstick by means of which we can measure the relative values of differing interpretations

of Scripture.]

"Blessed is the man" says verse 1 *"who walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful."* This word "blessed" is capable of deeper shades of meaning than the A.V. suggests. "How happy the man..." is Rotherham's rendering, and Young is even more emphatic with "O the happiness of that one who ..." It is significant that "happiness" is the first quality to be mentioned in the Psalms; and characteristic of God! His eternal purpose in creation is to promote happiness amongst His creatures, and full happiness is only to be achieved by complete harmony with Him. So our religion is not a thing to be kept apart from daily life and practised solely at special times; every affair and activity of every day can be woven into the fabric of one's personal communion with God and by this is sanctified. *"Whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus"* (Col. 3. 17). *"All things work together for good to them that love God"* (Rom. 8. 28). *"The joy of the Lord is your strength"* (Neh. 8. 10). This is the normal condition for human life, from which men have fallen away, and only as they come back to full dedication of life and its activities to God can they find true happiness.

"But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in his law doth he meditate day and night." (vs. 2). Here is the great principle; we must be students of the ways of God and learn to understand the principles upon which He has founded creation. The term "law" here is not confined merely to a set of commandments with negative prohibitions—"Thou shalt not . . ."—but extends to the basic principles of Divine creation which in fact lie at the root of every code of laws. We must learn why; why righteousness is desirable and sin to be abhorred and eschewed; why God is dealing now with the disciples of Christ, the "Church" and will turn to convert the whole world only when the next Age, the Millennial Age, has dawned.

"The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul" says the Psalmist in another place (Psalm 19. 7). *"O how I love thy law; it is my meditation all the day."* *"Great peace have they that love thy law, and nothing shall offend them"* (Psa. 119. 97 and 165). In more measured cadence the Preacher says *"The law of the wise is a fountain of life, that he might depart from the snares of death"* (Prov. 13. 14).

"In the night" says the Psalmist (Psa. 42. 8) *"his song shall be with me."* Our faith is not for daytime only; it is a twenty-four hour a day and a seven day a week faith, and often it is during the silence of the night that our deepest revelations come.

Vs. 3 *"And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season."* In the first Eden there were trees of life and a river that "watered the garden" and so gave it life (Gen. 2. 9-10). In the

second Eden there are to be trees of life and a river of water of life (Rev. 22. 1-2; Ezek. 47. 12) and the trees are to be for both food and sustenance and healing. The Psalmist links the symbol to life now. Those trees of life of the Millennial Age are none other than the righteous of this Age who have lived according to the standards of the first two verses of this Psalm. Because they have entered into the Divine way of life they become "trees of life" to give both sustenance and healing to the redeemed multitudes who will come back from the grave "in that day". Then it will be true of these "*ministers of reconciliation*" (2 Cor. 5. 18) that "*whatsoever he doeth shall prosper*" (vs. 3).

There is a peculiar fitness in the association of trees with rivers. In hot countries men plant trees on the banks of rivers and streams in order to screen the water from the solar heat and to check evaporation. The trees thrust down their roots into the moist soil and are themselves sustained by the same waters that they are conserving for the use and benefit of men. "*There is a river, the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God, the holy place of the tabernacles of the Most High*" (Psa. 46. 4). Every consecrated follower of the Lord Jesus during this Gospel Age is himself a "tree" being nourished by that river which is the knowledge of God revealed through the holy Scriptures; and each follower is by his Christian life and devotion helping to conserve that Word, against the coming Millennial Day when its benefits will be made free to all mankind. "*The Spirit and the Bride say 'come' . . . and whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely*" (Rev. 22. 17).

Now we come to the other side of the picture. "The ungodly are not so but are like the chaff which the wind driveth away." (vs. 4). This likening of the wilfully wicked man and the hopelessly evil thing to chaff which is doomed to be scattered and lost is definite in the Scriptures. "*Let them be as the chaff before the wind*" says the Psalmist in Psa. 35. 5 "*and let the angel of the Lord destroy them*". "*The grass withereth, the flower fadeth; but the word of our God shall stand for ever*" (Isa. 48. 8). "*How oft*" says Job (21. 17-18) "*is the candle of the wicked put out! How oft cometh their destruction upon them! . . . they are as stubble before the wind, and as chaff that the storm carrieth away*". David continues in the same strain (Psa. 37. 1-2) "*Fret not thyself because of evil doers, neither be thou envious against the workers of iniquity; for they shall soon be cut down like the grass, and wither as the green herb*". and again (Psa. 5. 4-5) "*Thou art not a God that hath pleasure in wickedness, neither shall evil dwell with thee. The foolish (properly 'worthless') shall not stand in thy sight; thou hatest all workers of iniquity*". And this, which is said of individuals, is equally true of every evil institution which cumbers the earth. This aspect was seen in vision when Daniel interpreted the king's dream and described how all the might and power of those empires which stand in the way of Messiah's Kingdom will be destroyed

by the "stone cut out of the mountain without hands" and how every vestige of them is to be scattered like the "chaff of the summer threshing-floors" (Dan. 2. 35).

This makes plain the Divine intention with regard to wilful evildoers. After the full and fair opportunity for life which is to be offered to every man under the reign of Christ in the Millennial Age, the penalty for continued and wilful sin will fall inevitably upon the sinner; withdrawal of life, the Divine gift of which the individual concerned refuses to make proper use. As final and irrevocable as the dispersing of chaff from the threshing floor, carried by the wind and utterly lost, is this, the logical and inevitable result of wilful and incorrigible sin.

"Therefore" says the inspired writer with conviction *"the ungodly shall not stand in the judgement, nor sinners in the congregation (assembly) of the righteous."* (vs. 5). There is a direct link with the New Testament doctrine of the resurrection of mankind during the Millennial Age here, for the word rendered "stand" is one that has the meaning of standing firm or being set up. The New Testament word for resurrection is "anastasis" which means a re-standing or standing up again. *"There shall be a resurrection (anastasis) of the dead"* said Paul (Acts 24. 15) *"both of the just and unjust"*. *"The queen of the south shall rise up in the judgement"* said Jesus (Luke 11. 31-32) and again *"All that are in the grave shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto resurrection to life (Greek) and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection to judgement (eis anastasin kriseus)*. This verse in Psalm 1 is clearly a reference to the fact that, although "sinners" will in fact be restored to life in the Millennial Age, no sinner will "stand" in that judgement; he will either cease to be a sinner and so enter into life, or, remaining a sinner, reap the logical consequence of that choice as expressed in the concluding words of the Psalm *"the way of the ungodly shall perish"*.

In no finer words could the Most High express His determination to root out and destroy every vestige of sin from the fair earth of his creating, and to usher all mankind-- "whosoever will"—into the orderly and glorious life which is the rightful inheritance of all who will eventually conform willingly to their Creator's wise and loving designs. *"Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."*

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STUDIES IN THE FIRST EPISTLE OF JOHN

Part 28

1 John 5.16-21

"If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask, and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death; I do not say that he shall pray for that. All unrighteousness is sin, but there is a sin not unto death." (vs.16-17)

A great deal of discussion— much of it not very well informed— has centred itself upon this subject of the sin unto death. John's words here appear at first sight to imply that sin can be separated into two categories— that which can be forgiven and that which cannot be forgiven. For the sinner who comes within the first, prayer can be made with some certainty that a favourable answer will be forthcoming from Heaven. For the one whose sin is embraced by the second, prayer is useless, and the thoughtful disciple is not recommended to pray for such an one. Now that is a most perplexing position for those who believe that God has appointed a future day of trial in the which He will give to all men everywhere a full and fair opportunity to repent of their evil deeds and come to Him in repentance and dedication of life. These words of John immediately pose the question: What is the sin that, committed during this Age, while as yet the "present evil world" is running its course, is of so heinous and irremediable nature that it debars for ever from the opportunities that redeemed humanity of the Millennial Age are to have in such abundance?

Fortunately, perhaps, we do not have to find an answer to such a question. If there is in fact a sin that cuts the offender off from all hope of repentance and salvation, either now or in the world to come, we who are still in the flesh will not be able to pronounce judgment upon it. One thing is very certain; only God Himself, who sees into the heart, can ever say whether or not any individual is beyond hope of reclamation. Even in the next Age, when the secret of men's hearts will be laid open for all to see in a fashion never known in all the history of this present world, it will only be God the Judge of all who passes the final sentence. So that when John says that if any man *sees* his brother sin a sin which is not unto death.. Or is unto death ... he shall pray for it or not pray for it accordingly, he must be talking of something else than the case of the man who is already lost to all hope of redemption. He must certainly be talking of a distinction and a judgment which is in our power properly to make.

The expression "sin unto death" was in common use among the Jews in John's day; it referred to certain specific sins that were considered more than usually serious, which, under the Law Covenant, were punishable by death, "cutting off from among the people". Thus in Num.18.22 the rash Israelite who committed sacrilege by entering the Court of the Tabernacle and

approaching the Holy had thereby committed a sin “unto death” and was cut off from among the people. In Lev.22.9 the priest who denied his calling by profaning his priestly office similarly committed a “sin unto death”. In New Testament usage the expression really means a sin that calls for immediate and outwardly observable punishment in the same fashion. Thus Paul’s condemnation of the immoral member in 1 Cor.5 and his excommunication of the offender, is a case in point. This man had committed a sin unto death, a sin that implied a much greater measure of wilfulness and deliberateness than did the many common faults and failings of daily life in the Church. There was no question of his being eternally lost, but he was rigorously excluded from the fellowship and worship of the “*ecclesia*” until he had repented and reformed. Likewise on another occasion Paul declared that he had delivered Hymenaeus and Alexander over to Satan that they might learn not to blaspheme (1 Tim.1.20). In such cases it would seem that treatment other than prayer was necessary— not that there is any admission that prayer is of lesser avail than other measures, but that prayer for the sinner implies at least a measure of sorrow and repentance on the part of the sinner, and prayer then is made that strength against future temptation may be given and the sinner restored to a position of peace and reconciliation with God. Where the sin is so wilful and deliberate that there is, at the moment, no regrets, then, says John, he does not insist that we should pray for the offender. Even so he does not forbid prayer being made; only that prayer is not laid upon us as an obligation in such case. And in all these instances there is no suggestion that the case is hopeless even though it be not an appropriate one for prayer at the moment. The corrective judgments of God may yet bring the sinner to an appreciation of his position and his eventual reconciliation, even as it did with the man in 1 Cor.5.

There must be a difference between this case of the disciple who is said to commit a sin unto death and the position of those spoken of in Heb.6 who cannot be renewed to repentance. It has been said that it may well be possible for human beings steeped in willing sin to destroy their own capacity for repentance, as though they have come to the point where there is absolutely nothing left on which God can work to bring them back to Himself. Be that as it may, it is clear that in Heb.6 we have a clear description of some such state of apostasy but no indication that any earthly observer is given power to say when that point has been reached in any particular case. One would think, however, that sufficient outward signs of such an apostasy would be evident to justify the withdrawal of the term “brother”. Such an one must surely have come to the point where he is quite evidently no longer one of the “brethren in Christ”; the nature of his apostasy would at least demand that. And these in John’s epistle, even though fallen into sin, are still brethren. “If any man sees

his *brother sin...*”. It seems clear therefore that the two cases are not the same.

It comes then to this, that in our prayers for the recovery and reconciliation of the erring ones in our midst we may have confidence that in general our prayers will be affirmatively answered and life given to the fallen in consequence of our prayers, but not in every case. There may, and will, be some instances where God— not we ourselves— can see that the sin is of a nature that needs stern remedial treatment—judgments—before reconciliation can be granted, and when that happens, if unwittingly we have prayed for such an one, our prayers will not be answered affirmatively— not at once anyway. As though to assure us that even though this be the case there will always be ample scope for our prayers the Apostle tells us in rounding off this little allusion, “all unrighteousness is sin, but there is a sin not unto death”. There will always be plenty of faults and stumblings and failures to reach up to the mark which can form the burden of our prayers.

“We know that whosoever is born of God sinneth not; but he that is begotten of God keepeth himself, and that wicked one toucheth him not.” (vs.18)

This verse goes back to verse 9 of chapter 3 and tells us practically the same thing. It evidently comes in here again as a reminder after talking about the sinners and their reclamation, John tells us that the ones born of God do not sin at all! It sounds very contradictory but of course it is not really so. It is in the spirit of our minds and intents of our hearts that we do not sin; in our flesh there are still the old processes working and leading us from time to time to do the things we would not, and these are the things for which we need the prayers of our brethren, which is exactly what we are told in verse 16. Paul explained this apparent paradox very clearly when he said in Rom.7.25 “With the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin”. “The good that I would I do not” he said earlier in the chapter “but the evil that I would not, that I do. Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me.” That is exactly what John means when he says that the one born of God sinneth not, and in the same breath he tells us to pray for the brother who has sinned.

“And we know that we are of God, and the whole world lieth in wickedness.” (vs.19)

The last word should really be “wicked one” - the Devil. “All the world is under the influence of the Evil One” says the 20th Century version. In these few words John sums up the whole situation. We who have given ourselves to God and repudiated the Devil and all his works are the only representatives on earth of God’s Kingdom. We are on the Lord’s side.

Everybody else, whether they know it or not, are on the other. We represent the outposts of the army of light in the enemy's country. The time is to come when the Rider on the White Horse will descend from heaven with His armies and do battle with all the evil powers of earth and utterly overthrow them, but for the present we few who still remain are His only representatives. Glory be to God that the time will not be much longer delayed and that, the Evil One bound so that he may deceive the nations no more, the world will no longer lie in the Wicked One but stand erect in the glorious liberty of the children of God.

So we come to the end. The aged Apostle has said all that he has to say, of doctrine, of exhortation, of warning, of reproof, of encouragement. He has put forth his every effort to instruct his disciples, knowing how much they need that instruction. His eye looks down the Age, not discerning how long it must be before the signs of the end appear and men realise that the coming again of his Lord is actually realise that the coming again of his Lord is actually taking place; but he realises that all he has said must be for the instruction of the Church in all generations until that time. He has done all he can, and now in a final brief recapitulation which reads almost like a benediction he tells us in a few well-chosen words just what is the basis of his faith and our faith, and leaves us there, secure in the knowledge that his Lord will never let go the hands of those who have put their hands into His, and continue to keep them so.

"And we know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, that we may know him that is true, even in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life."

"Little children, keep yourselves from idols."

"Amen."

THE END

AOH

STAND AND CONSIDER

Reflections on an unexpected experience

I joined as usual in the Good Friday celebrations in our village. It is a good day to put on one side the things I don't like about other churches, and remember that all who truly believe in Jesus Christ are brothers and sisters. In the village it is the custom that each year a different church is host for a united

service. This will be much the same from year to year, with hymns, readings and a sermon all focused on our Lord's death and our response of sorrow for our sins which brought Him there, and love for Him, and a rededication of our lives. This year was different, because we discovered the service was to be based on the Stations of the Cross.

It was something with which I was not familiar. The Stations were a tradition dating from the days when most people could not read, let alone study the scriptures, which would have been in Latin or Greek. Back in the Middle Ages there was much concern about the details of the physical sufferings of Christ. Those who went on pilgrimage to the Holy Land would have seen where these things happened, and might stop at significant places on the way to the Cross, at standing places or 'stations'. Later in history, when the Turks prevented access to the holy places, the custom grew of marking these 'stations' within a church, with a sculpture, carving or picture, so that people could visit and pause and worship within their own country and home church. This custom was promoted by the Franciscans, notably in the eighteenth century, but present day churches still set up their stations. The number of stations has varied at times from 5 up to 42, but has become standard traditionally at 14, each station marking one of the events from Jesus being condemned by Pilate to his being laid in the tomb.

So, at our Good Friday service, we stood and gazed in turn at each of the 14 stations. At each a prayer was said, a verse of scripture was read and the verse of a hymn was sung, and there was a short comment or meditation. I have to say that I was a little disappointed with this particular celebration. For my taste there was too much empty repetition, no time to really think deeply about what was happening to Jesus, and the hymn was inappropriate. But I have since seen copies of a number of versions of the service, all different, with various ways of guiding thoughts in a way that is helpful. For example, one might be approaching Easter with worries and concerns, such as.... justice in the world.... impending old age.... problems of being a mother.... the need to forgive someone. These themes can be incorporated in the service, and it can be quite good as we think of these things to place them in our minds alongside what Jesus was feeling, and achieving, on the way to Calvary. The Stations can also be used as a visual aid to teach children about the events of Good Friday. It is possible to think at each point of some Bible character who was present, and enter imaginatively into their feelings— Simon of Cyrene, for example, or the women following, or a soldier present. A youth club could present their reactions in dramatic readings. There are all sorts of possibilities.

One thing I noticed in our service was that the Stations did not correspond exactly with the Bible account. The main events were right, but

some significant things were left out, and some items based on church tradition were added. None of Jesus' words on the cross were mentioned, nor the penitent thief. No 'Father, forgive them'. The stations based on tradition but not scripture included particular occasions when Jesus fell under the cross, or when He met his mother on the road (we know that a little later she was standing near the cross), or when someone called Veronica stepped out of the crowd to wipe His face.

Because of these discrepancies alternative versions of the Stations have been produced. One version, authorised in 1975 starts with the Last Supper and continues through to the Resurrection. Another in 1991 goes from the Garden of Gethsemane to Jesus being laid in the tomb.

The Stations are a vehicle for worship which if well used can awake deeper thoughts of Christ, which go beyond ritual and tradition to the heart of things.

GC

From an Introduction to the 'Stations':

My Lord

Help me prepare to take these fourteen steps in memory of your Passion. As each step led you to your death for love of me, so may I, with each step die more to myself.

Empty me, Beloved Lord, of all thoughts except those that will bring me to a deeper understanding of what you endured for my sake..

I offer myself and my small journey for all those who today still cause you agony by perpetuating the rejection you suffered.

May we never forget the depth of your love for us as you repeatedly forgave our sins which brought about your death.

Lord, if it is your will, lay my cross on me gently and grant me the strength to carry it bravely with you and for the love of you.

The Twenty Answers

1. Dorcas (Acts 9.36-42)

2. Euodia (Philippians 4.2)

3. Damaris (Acts 17.34)

4. Tertullus (Acts 24.1-8)

5 - 8. Barabbas (Matthew 27.15-26) Barnabas (Acts 11, etc.)

Bartholomew (Matthew 10.3 = Nathaniel) Bartimaeus (Mark 10.46)

9 - 11 Husband of Sapphira (Acts 5.1-6) Helped Paul (Acts 9.10-19)

High priest (Acts 24.1)

12 - 20

- Simon Peter (Matthew 4.18)
- Simon the Zealot (Matthew 10.4, Acts 1.13)
- Simon brother of Jesus (Matthew 13.55)
- Simon the leper at Bethany (Matthew 26.6)
- Simon of Cyrene, carried the cross (Matthew 27.32)
- Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7.36-50)
- Simon, father of Judas (John 6.71, 12.4, 13.2)
- Simon the sorcerer (Acts 8.9-24)
- Simon the Tanner (Acts 9.10)

Gospel Word-search

When you have found and marked off the 11 words which are part of a familiar text, the letters remaining tell a very great truth.

R	S	E	R	I	S	E	D
G	O	D	T	R	U	T	H
S	N	T	S	I	R	H	C
A	E	S	A	A	L	L	S
V	O	U	N	I	L	O	V
E	E	S	D	T	D	H	N
D	O	E	E	W	O	E	E
M	O	J	R	L	G	D	M

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Thou crownest the year with thy goodness Psalm 65.11



BIBLE STUDY MONTHLY

FOUNDED 1924

The Bible Study Monthly is published to promote knowledge of the Bible. It sees the Scriptures as a true record of God's dealings with the human race, needing to be understood in our generation. It looks for the advent of our Lord, and His reign of peace and justice on the earth. *"Speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into Him who is the head, into Christ"* (Ephesians 4:15 NRSV)

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PSALM 65.11

Praise God! He crowns the year with his goodness!

This is a shout for harvest time, when all the crops have been safely gathered in, the climax of the year. The words come from Psalm 65. In modern society, when food comes from the shops and is always there to be purchased, it is difficult for us to enter into these heartfelt words. But for many communities across the world, life and death still depends on the regular gathering in of crops in their season, for which they thank God.

The 'crowning' of the year in this psalm has been given a special slant by Bible commentators. One of them compares the crown of the year to a coronet or circlet which goes all round the head, and takes the thought that God's goodness encircles the whole year... which is true. Another commentator has the thought of there being one particular year in mind, and God has specially blessed that year. That too could be true, for there are times when we are specially aware that God is with us.

We cannot ask David, shepherd, warrior, king, and writer of the psalm, what was in his mind. He composed this psalm three thousand years ago, to be sung so that others could share his joy in the Lord. It was about more than just the harvest.

We might imagine the choirmaster in the Jerusalem Temple in later years choosing this song which had been left by David, and training his musicians to rouse the echoes with their praise as each stanza was sung. And what a psalm it is!

"It is right, it is fitting, to praise God in Zion." Out of the silence rise these solemn words. Zion, the temple hill which David had captured, is surely the place where God should be praised. The musicians sing in all earnestness.

"We will keep our promise to you, we must fulfil our vows. For you answer prayer." David had known that their reliance upon God must be matched by faithfulness on their part. It was this relationship with the one true God which would attract other nations to them, or rather, to Him. *"So peoples everywhere will come to you."*

But God's own people were not a good example. They sinned. David knew all about the need for forgiveness. *"Though our sins defeat us, though our faults overwhelm us, You blot them out, you cancel and forgive them, you purge them away."*

The choirmaster stood, looking around the holy temple and its courts. He was happy, this was the right place for him to be. The song went on.... *"Happy is the man you choose, and invite to live in your house. We shall be satisfied and have our fill of your good things, the sheer bliss of your holy temple."*

King David had been the one with the great world view of God active among men. By God's help his own people had come through their troubles, just as centuries before the nation had been rescued from Egypt. God was still faithful. God was still powerful. David knew of far islands and distant mountains, of tribes at war. God could bring them peace.

*"You answer us with awesome deeds, O God our Saviour.
You do right, you are loyal, you bring us victory.
All over the earth, you are men's hope; in the farthest islands, they trust you.
You set in place the mountains by your strength
for you are clothed in mighty power.
You calm the clamour of the ocean, the clamour of the waves,
You still the tumult of the nations,
And dwellers at the world's far end are awed at the proofs of your power,
Where morning dawns, where evening fades,
from earth's one end to the other, they shout for joy."*

Yes, it was harvest time again. The rains had come. The ploughing and reaping had been successful. Once again, they could eat, and live. The water and the fertile land were God's gift to men.

*"You have visited the land and watered it,
rain makes it rich and fertile.
God's river is full with water for crops and corn,
for this is how you arrange it.
The winter rain soaks ridges and furrows,*

*softens the earth that we have ploughed.
Showers of spring rain make the young plants grow and flourish.
What a rich harvest! Your goodness crowns the year!
Rich stores fall where you pass, your carts overflow with abundance.
Even the hill pastures of the desert overflow,
the hillsides are wrapped in joy, the meadows clothe themselves with sheep,
the valleys are covered with corn.
They shout for joy. They sing.”*

In the temple the singing ended, a happy peace descended after their song. The temple courts began to darken.

And so we have the psalm today, No. 65 in the Book of Psalms, page 576 in my bible, about the middle. The year, 2012. The harvest, in the northern hemisphere, completed. God's love, still the same.

The psalm speaks of a time when everything is as it should be. God is acknowledged, promises to Him are kept, sinners are forgiven and reassured, people the world over seek God and are blessed by Him. Wars have been made to cease and agriculture prospers in a favorable climate. As a picture of David's time, this seems almost too good to be true. Comparing it with our time, it has nothing to say about ethnic cleansing, global warming, pollution, droughts or floods. But it does speak to us of a hope for the future time, when God will have crowned every one of the years with his goodness.

GC

FIRST

To be first seems important in society in this present world. Who was the first man in space to land on the moon? Who was the first to the South Pole... to climb Everest... the first President of America? Lives have been lost in trying to be first. Captain Scott and his team died in Antarctica, Mallory died on Everest. Women are also caught in this, the 2007 United States election was a case in point. Would they have the first woman president... or the first black president?

First can mean preeminent. First class travel, first class post, and a sense of superiority! Or the winner is first. In general elections, the system of first past the post. Or the winner of the Olympics must be the best.

We may not like some of the implications of such things, which may be viewed as arrogance or selfishness, or conceit.

The Bible states that God was first, 'in the beginning God'. What happened we do not know, there is an implication that there was no beginning but a past continuing back and back without any definite beginning except that at some point the heavens and 'our' earth was created. Isaiah 41.4 says 'I the Lord, the first, and with the last; I am he'. Isaiah 44.6, 'I am the first, and I am the last; and beside me there is no God'. The NT goes on in a similar vein when we take Revelation 1.8, 'I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, saith the LORD, which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty.' The phrase 'Alpha and Omega' is used again in Revelation 21.6 and 22.13. We think of God existing on his own all the time, with Christ, the Logos (Word) eventually, and the angels. Maybe desiring some type of communion.

Intelligent beings have a need to communicate, and God did create man in his own image. First there was God and then man. 1 John 4.19 says that God loved us first, before we could love him. 'God is love, and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him.' (v.16) God's love can easily be seen in sending his Son to die for the sins of the world. 'Hereby perceive we the love of God, because He (that is, Christ) laid down his life for us.' God recognised this cost at the beginning, as it says 'The Lamb slain before the foundation of the world'.

Hebrews 12.23 speaks of the 'church of the firstborn'. A firstborn child is a special child whose position in the family cannot be changed. The elder child is always an elder child and cannot be supplanted by the birth of subsequent children. We have been called to be a class of 'firstborn' people, so let us now look towards our response to this love and his instructions as to the first steps.

First, a willing mind. To start out on our Christian journey it must be our choice, not a forcible removal from where we start. Abraham was willing to leave Haran, having been born in the old Sumerian city of Ur of the Chaldees. Genesis 12.1,2 'Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will show thee; and I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing.' He was not frightened into going, but seems to have been happy to go, without knowing exactly where to.

I have thought for some time how important it is to make that first step. Having set out on the journey, what are we told to do first? Mark 12.30 Jesus said that the first commandment was to 'love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength; this is the first commandment.' This is not dissimilar to the first of the Ten Commandments

in Exodus. These instructions seem to be our response to God's love and favour. 1 John 2.5 'Whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected; hereby know we that we are in him.' This indicates not merely keeping the letter of the law, but the spirit of the law, which ought to be qualified by saying that there has only ever been one man who has been able to keep the law perfectly.

We are also told in Matthew 6.33 'Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and all his righteousness...' It should be the priority of one's life. We use the conscience God gave us to analyse our actions in the big and little things of life. We all have to prioritize, whether at work or at home. This can be a struggle or maybe a balancing act. For example, here at present it's a lovely sunny spring day, I like being outside, but I have a talk to write. The scripture says we have to work while it is day because the night comes when no man can work. The kingdom will come eventually and we see its embryo form now, and this engenders in us some sense of urgency.

We need to think of his righteousness. Philippians 4.8 tells us to think of whatsoever things are true... just... pure... honest... lovely... of good report.. Appreciating God's virtues and attributes merges with trying to copy such virtues. Many good examples in the scriptures put us on the path we should be on, and keep us there - not out of selfish self-interest like pursuing a sales target and bonus, but by a culture and emotion drawing us on to some better plane. But even that phrase seems very worldly, and only imperfectly puts into words what having a relationship with God and his Son can be like.

We would not be able to set out on our Christian journey if it was not for our Lord Jesus. He is the 'Lamb slain before the foundation of the world'. Luke 17.25 says, 'first must he suffer many things and be rejected'. We know he had to come into the world and live a life of sacrifice and suffer. We know from 1 Corinthians 15 that he had to die for our sins as it had been prophesied. We know he was buried in a tomb, and that he rose from the dead. 'Christ is now risen from the dead and become the *first fruits* of them that slept.' His rising from the dead is a guarantee that we in our turn will be raised. First fruit has special connotations to those of us who grow fruit and flowers, I usually gauge spring from the first daffodil. And of course when you get the first fruits the expectation is many more will follow.

Revelation 14.4 says when talking about the 144,000 that they... 'follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth. These were redeemed from among men, being the firstfruits unto God and to the Lamb.' So they are special and have a particular place in the new arrangement. But there are warnings.

Revelation 2.4 We must not lose our first love. In our earthly lives a first love is special and never forgotten and precious, the first time our heart was opened and met by such another heart. What is more likely to be

remembered when it happened, where was I, what year, what month. What is less likely is that that first love remains. A little pamphlet came to me and asked the question, 'Have you taken your eyes off Jesus?' As children our parents told us to keep our eyes on the ball, so that we did not drop it. It is possible to lose our first love, but the one who loves us is always faithful and will never let us down. We have to do our bit to keep that relationship going, even if we are the weaker half, throughout our Christian lives. "He which hath begun a good work will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1.6)

There are other warnings. If offering a gift to God, first be reconciled to your brother (Matthew 5.24). This seems to show us the way to approach each day, to ask forgiveness of our sins. John 8.7 - he who is without sin can cast the first stone. It is not our position yet to judge others, but first we must work on ourselves. Matthew 7.5 First cast the beam out of thine own eye, before criticizing the mote in your brother's eye. Set your own house in order first.

But let us not finish on the warnings, but consider the wonderful aspects. We have been wonderfully blessed, wonderfully informed, are being wonderfully prepared with a wonderful prospect.

We started with God and his objective to fill the earth with beings having intellect and emotion. Who sent his Son to be a first fruit. And other first fruits who would learn his commandments and endeavour to live their lives in harmony with God and in relationship with him. If we continue in that relationship, watching out for the pitfalls outlined in the scriptures, we can take our place at last as first fruits, knowing that there are other fruits for which God has also provided.

1 Corinthians 2.9 Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him.

NAC

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CHRIST OUR PROPITIATION

"Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood" (Rom. 3. 25).

The thought behind this word "propitiation" is that of a means of blotting out sin.

It is not that of conciliating an offended Deity, the idea upon which much erroneous Christian theology has been built. To our English minds this understanding does not come so easily as it did to the first readers of Paul's epistle to the Romans, for when their eyes fell upon the word "*hilasterion*", which has been translated "propitiation", they thought instantly of the "mercy-seat" in the Most Holy of the Tabernacle - a means of covering sin and reconciling man with God - and so Christ was set forth as a "mercy-seat". When the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek, several centuries before Christ, the translators had been faced with the problem of finding a suitable Greek word to describe the "mercy-seat". They chose "*hilasterion*", which was the word for an altar or other means of offering sacrifices to appease or placate the pagan gods of Greece. This Greek translation, the Septuagint, was the one in general use in the time of Paul, and he would naturally use the same term. This is quite correctly translated "propitiation" in English. In a similar fashion, centuries later, the first English translators of the Hebrew Bible adopted "mercy-seat" to express the Hebrew "*kapphoreth*" because, as it is quaintly expressed in one early rendering "There God appeared mercifully unto them; and this was a figure of Christ". Now, "*kapphoreth*" means simply and solely a place of covering, and the "mercy-seat" was so named because the sins of Israel were "covered" by the annual sprinkling of the blood of the sin-offering.

"*Kaphar*" - to cover - is not used in the sense of putting a roof on a house or a hat on one's head, but it is a word which implies the absolute obliteration of that which is completely covered. It means, primarily, to paint an object with pitch or bitumen, and is also used in reference to an animal that is covered with a shaggy fur, or to the obliteration of writing by drawing the writing instrument completely over the characters. Here are some examples of its use:-

Gen. 6. 14. "Thou...shall *pitch* it (the ark) within and without with pitch."

Isa. 28. 18. "Your covenant with death shall be *disannulled*" (i.e., the written agreement or covenant shall be obliterated).

Prov. 16. 6, "By mercy and truth iniquity is *purged*."

It is this thought of covering, so as to obliterate completely, that lies behind the terms "reconciliation" and "atonement" in the Old Testament, for

both these words are translated from “*kaphur*”. Thus we have:-

Lev. 8. 15. “To make *reconciliation* upon it” (the brazen altar).

Dan. 9. 24. “To make *reconciliation* for iniquity.”

Ezek. 45. 17. “The meat offering, and the burnt offering, and the peace offerings, to make *reconciliation* for the house of Israel.”

Lev. 16. 6. “And Aaron shall...make an *atonement*.”

Lev. 16. 30. “On that day shall the priest make an *atonement* for you.”

Ezek. 16. 63. “When I am *pacified* toward thee for all that thou hast done, saith the Lord.”

And so God says (Isa. 44. 22) “I have *blotted out* as a thick cloud...thy sins.” When the High Priest sprinkled the blood of the bullock upon the “mercy-seat” on the Day of Atonement he was covering over and obliterating the sins of Israel from the sight of God.

There is perhaps, more of mystic truth than we have recognised in the lines of that familiar hymn:

“The Cross *now covers my sins*,
The past is *under the blood*;
I'm trusting in Jesus for all,
My will is the will of my God.”

AOH

THE STORYTELLER

As told by one of the Twelve

Hello! Let me introduce myself. I'm one of Jesus' disciples. No – I'm not Peter, or James, or John, or Andrew, or Philip, or even Judas Iscariot – in fact, I'm not one of the ones you think you already know something about. No, I'm one of the ones you don't really know much about at all, and even my friends don't seem know whether to call me Nathanael or Bartholomew. I don't mind, really. I quite like the name 'Nathanael' – in Hebrew, it means 'the gift of God', which is nice. 'Bartholomew' is just a family name – it means 'Son of Ptolemy' (or, if you prefer the Hebrew version, then I'm really 'Nathanael Bar Tolmai'), and you can tell from my father's Greek name that my family didn't come originally from around here. In fact, although I was living in Cana of Galilee when what I'm going to tell you about took place, I was really brought up to look down on Galileans – my family used to think of them as somewhat inferior beings! I regret that now, of course, but, as things turned out, it was that rather 'superior' attitude that brought me into contact

with Jesus, in the first place.

I have this friend called Philip, you see – you can tell from his name that he's another one who has Greek family-connections, although he and I had been living down in Galilee for quite a while. In those days, all the 'talk of the town' was about this prophet called 'John the Baptist'. Palestine was under Roman control then, of course, and the idea that God might have sent his people a prophet – like Elijah, or Isaiah – well, that certainly caught the popular imagination. Maybe God was about to send us the long-awaited 'Messiah', who would overthrow the hated Romans and re-establish a Jewish Kingdom like that of those great ancient Kings, David and Solomon! That was what we were all waiting for.

So, huge crowds started trekking out from the towns and villages, near and far, to see John – a charismatic figure if you ever saw one, with his rough camel-hair coat and long shaggy hair to match. They came in droves to hear what he was preaching on the banks of the Jordan. He had a thoroughly uncompromising message for them, too: “Repent of your sins, and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near!”

John had some 'disciples' – people who followed him, supported him, listened to his message and wanted to be like him. One or two of them were Galileans, too – they'd trekked a long way to hear John; that shows you how his message had gripped the popular imagination of our nation at that time.

A man named Jesus was there, too – people said he was a cousin of John the Baptist, and he too was a very striking figure, but not wild and unkempt like John. Tall and distinguished-looking, he wore a simple white robe. When John saw Jesus among the crowd, he pointed him out to some of his disciples, saying, “Look! There's the Lamb of God!” That's a strange expression, isn't it! In our culture, we would associate lambs with the annual Passover meal, of course.

Philip and I weren't among those who went up from Galilee to hear John, but later I got to know one of John's followers called Andrew (another Greek-sounding name – see what a mixed-up lot we all are?), and he told me what happened next. He said, “I was with one of John's other disciples, and we were really intrigued by this Jesus, whom we only knew to be another Galilean, from Nazareth, and we were intrigued by what John was saying about him.”

So, Andrew and another of John's followers decided to follow this Jesus and try to find out more about him. Jesus looks around, sees them following him. “What do you want?” he asks (firm, but gentle). They don't quite know what to say, so Andrew says, “Teacher, where are you staying?” “Come and see,” he says. It's about four o'clock in the afternoon, so they go with him to

the place where he's staying, and they stay with him the rest of the day and he talks to them. Andrew didn't tell me much of what Jesus said to them, but I could see from his face that it had been a life-changing experience for him.

Anyway, next thing you know, Andrew goes off to find his brother Simon (who's also trekked up from Galilee to see 'John the Baptist') and Andrew tells him, "We've found the Messiah – the Anointed One!" Off he takes Simon to meet Jesus. Jesus takes a good look at him, and he says, "Your name is Simon, son of John," (how did he know his name, I wonder?) "but you're going to be called Cephas" (which means 'a stone', or – if you like – 'Petros' – 'Peter' – that's the Greek equivalent).

Well, next day, Jesus decides to go back to Galilee. He finds my pal Philip, and he says to him, "Come and follow me." Philip was from Bethsaida – the same village as Andrew and Peter. Philip dashes off to look for me, and he finds me sitting in the shade of a fig-tree – in summertime it gets very hot around mid-day, and those big fig-leaves make good shelter from the sun. I can see that Philip's all excited! He blurts out, "We've found the very person that Moses and the prophets wrote about! His name is Jesus, the son of Joseph the Carpenter, from Nazareth." "Nazareth!" says I. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Well, as I told you, I'd been brought up to view all Galileans with a measure of suspicion, but up in Judea, Nazarenes had a particularly bad reputation. Anyway, Philip shrugs his shoulders, and says, "Come and see for yourself, then!" So off we go!

When we reached Jesus (it was half-an-hour's walk, to get there), he was talking to a group of his followers. As we approached him, he looks up at me and says, "Now, here's a genuine son of Israel – a man of complete integrity." Well, I'm dumbfounded, of course. I've never seen this man before, and, so far as I know, he's never seen me, either – and yet he seems to know all about me, already!

"How do you know about me?" says I. He laughs, and says, "I could see you under the fig tree, before Philip found you." How amazing is that! "Rabbi, you're the Son of God – the King of Israel!", I blurt out. "Do you believe that just because I told you that I'd seen you under the fig tree?", he says. "You'll see greater things than that! I'm telling you the truth, you're all going to see heaven open, and the angels of God going up and down on the Son of Man, the one who is the stairway between heaven and earth." I really had no idea what this Jesus was talking about, and I don't suppose the others did either, at that time, but I was fascinated by him. Later, some of what he'd said did begin to make some sense to me, but I'm still not quite sure that I understand what he was really saying to us.

Well, I was made very welcome amongst the circle of followers who'd already gathered around Jesus, so I just tagged along. Besides Philip, the

brothers, Simon and Andrew, were there, and their fishing colleagues, two more brothers – Zebedee's sons, James and John.

I mentioned earlier that I was living in Cana at that time, and a few days later some young friends of mine were going to get married in the village. I talked to them about Jesus; they'd heard about him too – they knew his mother Mary, and she was already on the guest-list; they wanted to meet Jesus too, so they asked me to invite him along, and he was to bring his friends with him. Jewish weddings are always splendid affairs – definitely not occasions to be missed! – so we all turned up on the day.

I'm sure you've heard what happened at the wedding – the story got around the whole district! The wine runs out (terribly embarrassing for the bridegroom, of course, since, in our tradition, he's the one who has to meet all the costs of the wedding!)

Mary tells the servants to do whatever Jesus tells them; he instructs them to fill their wine-jugs from one of the huge water-pots, and then they're to take it to the President of the Feast to taste, and – lo and behold! – suddenly, it's become wine! And not just any old wine, either, but really expensive, top-quality, vintage stuff! This Jesus was certainly beginning to sound like no ordinary village rabbi!

He'd talk about weddings too, sometimes, but we weren't always sure what he was getting at. “Do wedding guests fast”, he said, “while they're celebrating with the bridegroom? Of course they don't! They can't fast while the groom is with them. But someday, the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they'll fast, alright.” Then he'd go on to give us a couple of little illustrations: “Who'd patch up old clothing with new cloth? Surely, the new patch would shrink and rip away from the old cloth, leaving an even bigger tear than before! And no-one puts new wine into old wineskins, for the wine would burst them, and then, wine and skins would both be lost! New wine calls for new wineskins.”

He'd often use little illustrations like that – little stories which were meant to make us think! After all, we'd just seen him turning old water into new wine – were *we* being groomed by him to become those new wineskins, maybe?

Here's another example – remember that at night we all used simple oil-lamps in our homes. They weren't very efficient and oil was expensive, so they needed to be used sensibly. “Would any of you light a lamp,” he says, “and then put it under a basket, or under a bed? Of course you wouldn't! You'd put a lamp on a proper lamp-stand, where its light could shine out and fill the room.”

OK, thus far – but usually, he'd follow a little illustration like that with a little 'extra' bit, to make us think more deeply about the inner meaning of what

little 'extra' bit, to make us think more deeply about the inner meaning of what he'd just said to us. He goes on, "Everything that's hidden now will eventually be brought out into the open, and every secret will be brought to light." And then he'd add (as he so often did), "Anyone with the ears to hear should listen and understand." Made us think, you see!

To be continued

BK-S

A Sonnet

*Thoughts when walking through decayed woodland
which was undergoing redevelopment*

To serve the King? - or but to waste away,
A branch discarded, barren, rotted, dead,
Which fungus-spotted dark dull leaves embed,
Concealed 'neath withered growth of yesterday?
Is this our end? Inert to lie, a prey
To the rude rigour of youth's careless tread -
Or shattered, pounded, bulldozed, fed
To steely jaws as onward crawls today?

Yet life, love, zeal our King requires, the power
Of bright green shoots responding to his joy,
Drawing resurgent vigour from his earth,
Cherished by sun and spirit, washed each hour!
Then let us live, strive, serve, his gifts employ,
And living, to the dead display his worth.

Apart from me you can do nothing. John 15.5

CROSSWORD

This crossword was compiled using the Authorised Version, which may be needed for some of the clues.

1		2		3		4			5		6		7
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Clues

Across

- 1 Used for consecration (9,3) Exodus 30.22-33
8 Chosen to take the place of Judas (8) Acts 1.26
9 Mary complained to her son about how he did this (5) Luke 2.48
10 A man's life is like this (5) Psalm 103.15
11 King Ahasuerus had a great one (6) Esther 1.1
13 Not the branches but the fruit (4) Revelation 7.9
14 Peter told one (3) John 18.25
15 They threw dust into this (3) Acts 22.23
16 Jesus was a lamb without (4) 1 Peter 1.19
21 A Tishbite prophet (6) 1 Kings 17.1
22 Mistaken belief (5) Matthew 27.64
23 This is deceitful above all things (5) Jeremiah 17.9
24 The Egyptians to cross the Red Sea were drowned (8)
Hebrews 11.29
25 What every Christian should be (7,5) Matthew 5.16

Down

- 1 The scene of a great battle (10) Revelation 16.16
2 Israel became an nation many times (7) Jeremiah 30.17,
Isaiah 11.12
3 Saul defeated him at Jabesh-gilead (6) 1 Samuel 11.1,11
4 Worship of these is forbidden (6) Deuteronomy 16.22
5 Meaning, in the past (3,4) Matthew 5.21
6 The lame man did this (6) Acts 3.8
7 Put in a horse's mouth (3) James 3.3
12 Esau sold this (10) Hebrews 12.16
15 Jonah's father (7) Jonah 1.1
17 The king of Babylon stood at the of the way (7) Ezekiel 21.21
18 David lived in a house of these (6) 2 Samuel 7.2
19 Christ was the of God (6) 1 Peter 2.4
20 No evil shall those who trust God (6) Psalm 91.10
23 Son of Noah (3) Genesis 9.22

With acknowledgments to the YBS Messenger, 1958

DISCRIMINATE

Many of us think of prayer as something which comes from one's own heart and mind. It follows that when prayers are offered in the assembly among other believers, they are given extempore, not read out. This practice is specially valuable when prayers are offered at times of crisis or special need. Sometimes however prayers are made as a matter of routine - at a certain stage in a service, prayer is offered. Prayers given in these circumstances tend to become repetitive from week to week, indeed, if one knows who is to offer prayer, one knows almost exactly what will be said. This is not very different from reading prayers from a book, it is just that the minister's own usual words are repeated, and not someone else's. For the congregation an effort is required in these circumstances, to enter into the prayer with heart and mind and not just let the words drift over your head. The electric spark of truly spontaneous prayer may be missing, yet any prayer sincerely meant is surely heard by the Lord, and entering into prayer helps our faith to grow. The Lord's prayer is a particular example of this: as we repeat it together, it may not have the electric effect it had when Jesus first taught it as an example to a group of enthusiastic young disciples about to be sent out two by two on mission, but we can say it with meaning, and our needs and our worship will continue the same through the years.

There are some 'book' prayers which over time have become well known, and are often used because they speak what is in our hearts. The following prayer is one such:

Lord, teach me to be generous. Teach me to serve you as you deserve; to give and not to count the cost, to fight and not to heed the wounds, to toil and not to seek for rest, to labour and not to ask for any reward, save that of knowing that I do your will

It is always of interest to know who first wrote a prayer like this, and what was his character. This prayer is from the sixteenth century and is attributed to Ignatius of Loyola, ex-soldier, briefly a recluse, mystic, activist and devoted worker for his church which he believed to be Christ's church. His spirit of thoughtful devotion can be seen in these words which begin his 'Spiritual Exercises':

*The goal of our life is to live with God forever.
God, who loves us, gave us life.
Our own response of love allows God's life to flow into us without limit.
All the things in this world are gifts from God,
presented to us so that we can know God more easily
and make a return of love more readily.*

*As a result, we appreciate and use all these gifts of God
insofar as they help us to develop as loving persons.
But if any of these gifts become the centre of our lives,
they displace God, and so hinder our growth toward our goal.
In everyday life, then, we must hold ourselves in balance
before all of these created gifts, insofar as we have a choice
and are not bound by some obligation.
We should not fix our desires on health or sickness,
wealth or poverty, success or failure, a long life or a short one.
For everything has the potential of calling forth in us
a deeper response to our life in God.
Our only desire and our one choice should be this:
I want and I choose what better leads to God's deepening his life in me.*

There are not many who would disagree with this, though it may be difficult to live up to. It is sad that Ignatius taught other things, that cause problems. He was insistent, for example, on the authority of the church. Freedom of thought was not something he accepted. *"That we may be altogether of the same mind in conformity with the Church herself, if she shall have defined anything to be black which appears to our eyes to be white, we ought in like manner to pronounce it to be black. For we must undoubtedly believe, that the Spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Spirit of the Orthodox Church His Spouse, by which Spirit we are governed and directed to salvation, are the same."* He believed that his church spoke for Christ, being Christ's bride. If only!

This is a tendency which we notice in many denominations. 'The brethren believe this.... so you ought to believe it.' There is a balance to be struck here: if someone has mad ideas - heresies? - we cannot be expected to follow the ideas and should avoid the teaching. But this is not the same as believing exactly what we are told to believe by those in leadership. The test is whether the teaching is true. And who is to decide what is true?

A further teaching of Ignatius is that *'it is permissible to do evil that good may come'*. We shake our heads at this, but there is a point to consider. Is locking someone in jail an evil? It seems so to the criminal concerned (and who says he really is guilty?) Or to drop a bomb, an atom bomb. It is claimed that what happened at Hiroshima and Nagasaki brought one war to a speedy end, and has prevented the occurrence of further global wars. Was not this a supreme example of an evil deed which was intended to have good effects? In the case of Ignatius, however, this teaching permitted the 'Church' to torture people, so as to make them believe, or at least to say, the right things, and also to make them betray heretics.

In all these things we need to discriminate. Freedom? or authority? Spontaneous prayer? or using the prayers others have written? Truth? or possible error? Assurance? or bigotry?

Those who lead need a proper humility, for they may be wrong. We who follow need wisdom, to seek for the mind of Christ.

GC

ZECHARIAH, PROPHET OF THE RESTORATION

1. The Prophet and the Book

A strange and thrilling time was the Era of the Restoration, when fifty thousand eager pioneers left Babylon and set out across the desert for the ruined country of Judea, there to rebuild a Temple and a homeland. Few of them had seen Judea before; seventy years had elapsed since their fathers had been taken captive to Babylon, fifty-one since the Temple and city of Jerusalem had been destroyed, and most of the returning pilgrims had been born and brought up in Babylon and knew of their ancestors' homeland only by repute and description. But now Babylon was fallen, given into the power of Cyrus the Persian conqueror, and Cyrus had granted leave to all of the Jewish community in his new conquest to go back to the land of their fathers and there restore their Temple, their national worship, and some semblance of their old-time communal life, requiring only that they continue loyal to the suzerainty of Persia. So they came, bearing with them the secret vessels of the Temple so ruthlessly despoiled by the soldiers of Nebuchadnezzar half a century ago, exhibited as trophies of conquest in the Babylonish Temple of Marduk, and now destined to stand in their rightful place and serve their rightful role in the ritual of the worship of the God of Heaven. No wonder they sang, as the Psalmist says they did sing, on that arduous journey *"When the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream. Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing."* (Psa. 126. 1-2). No wonder as they came into the desolated land and camped among the ruined buildings of what had once been Jerusalem, they saw around them, by the eye of faith, the glorious land that was soon to be, and they themselves, the people of the Lord, exalting Israel once again to a place among the nations, mighty in the strength of the God of Israel.

It was not long before the golden vision faded and the old enemies of greed, indifference and moral laxity asserted themselves. Commercialism

replaced sacrifice; the acquisition of property and the building of houses attracted more attention than the erection of the Temple of God. The community suffered accordingly. *"Is it time for you. O ye"* thundered Haggai the prophet *"to dwell in your ceiled houses, and this Temple lie waste? Ye have sown much, and bring in little; ye eat, but ye have not enough; ye drink, but ye are not filled; ye clothe you, but there is none warm. Why? saith the Lord of Hosts. Because of my Temple that is waste and ye attend every man unto his own house?"* (Hag. 1. 4-9). Sixteen years it was since the pioneers came to Jerusalem with such high hopes, and this was all there was to show for it! No wonder Zerubbabel, the governor of the colony, and Joshua the High Priest, were ashamed as they led the people in a great outburst of enthusiasm which sought to rectify the wrongs which had been allowed to develop.

It is at this point that Zechariah comes into the picture. A much younger man than his fellow prophet Haggai, he had nevertheless shared in the journey from Babylon, and from the nature of his prophetic vision shows that he must have known much about life in that notorious city. Like Haggai, he was possessed of a burning zeal for the establishment in Judea of a true theocratic State, and a certainty that all the Divine promises relating to the coming glory of Israel must most certainly come to pass. In this the two prophets were markedly different from the Governor and the High Priest, both of whom seem to have failed to display those qualities of leadership and foresight necessary for so great a purpose.

Zerubbabel had been appointed Governor of the colony by Cyrus, responsible to him for maintaining its loyalty to Persia. The appointment was obviously a diplomatic move. Zerubbabel was the legal heir and successor to Jehoiachin the deposed King of Judah. He was probably in his early thirties and does not seem to have been particularly distinguished. Joshua the High Priest was a grandson of Seraiah, High Priest at the time of Jerusalem's destruction, who was executed by Nebuchadnezzar; he was most likely a much older man. These two figure largely in Zechariah's prophecy. Zechariah himself was of the priestly tribe. He says of himself that he was the son of Berachiah and grandson of Iddo. From Neh. 12. 15 it is evident that Zechariah was still alive in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah some seventy years after the Return, by which time he must have been of a considerable age. Tradition has it that - unusually for a Hebrew prophet - he survived and died peacefully in extreme old age and was buried beside his old friend and colleague Haggai. His prophetic ministry must therefore have spanned at least fifty years.

The book of Zechariah consists of three main divisions, and the style and subject matter of the third is a vastly different nature from that of the other two. The first division, occupying chapters 1 to 6, dated in the second year of Darius (520 B.C) the year in which the building of the Temple was

resumed, comprises a series of visions the subject of which is the restoration of Jerusalem and of Judah as a nation, leading onward in time to the consummation of Israel's history in the Millennial Kingdom and accepted Divine rule over all the earth. These visions are highly symbolic and the imagery is taken from the writings of the prophets who preceded Zechariah; to understand their meaning to any extent even today requires a reasonably detailed knowledge of the Old Testament. Thus in the first version the prophet sees Israel in captivity to the great nations of then current history – Assyria, Babylon and Persia – and the time came for God to redeem his promise of deliverance for Jerusalem. From that the scene changes to the preparation of the Promised Land for the returning multitudes and a hint that the complete fulfilment of this must extend into a then far future day. Next comes the preparation of the royal Priest-King who is to rule “in that day” accompanied by the Divine instrument of salvation forged from amongst men – the “servant” of Isaiah’s prophecy, to be a light to the nations to declare God’s salvation to the ends of the earth. Following that comes the promulgation of Divine Law which will root out all evil and establish everlasting righteousness, and finally the regathering of all from the many dispersions which have afflicted God’s people during the course of history, and the full establishment of the Millennial order of things. In these visions Zechariah takes his stand in the land of Judah of his own day and look forward to the end of time, describing what he realises are the principles of the Divine purpose yet to be worked out. In all of this he gives evidence of a clear-sighted understanding of the basic laws of God and the road which, not only Israel, but all men, must traverse to reach the objective God has set.

The second division, given two years later, whilst rebuilding of the Temple was actively proceeding, covers chapters 7 and 8 and consists of two “oracles”, or messages from Heaven to be declared to those of the people in Zechariah’s day directly concerned. Although at first sight these chapters appear to be of purely local application to events in the time of Zechariah, closer examination reveals that here is enshrined a statement of the essential principles upon which God ultimately bases his acceptance of Israel at the end of the Age and the manner in which He will use Israel in the work of his Kingdom. The entire picture is presented in the form of what, in mediaeval England, was called a masquerade, a kind of play in which the actors take their places, asking and answering questions in which the message to be given is contained. In this instance representatives from the religious fraternity of Israel come to Zechariah to enquire as to the propriety of certain ceremonial observances; the prophet tells them, in effect, that since their past observances have been characterised by ritualism rather than sincerity, God is not interested in their offerings anyway. This gives opportunity for a stirring exhortation to sincere repentance and reformation of life that they might be truly fitted for the

Divine purpose; that purpose is then revealed to be nothing less than the exaltation of Israel and the Israel land as the centre of Divine administration on earth when the due time should come, but all this is dependant upon faith in sincerity. So the terminal point of the oracles is the same as that of the visions of chapters 1-6, the glory and blessing of the Millennial Kingdom.

In the visions the necessity as well as the certainty of Divine power and action to establish the "new heavens and earth" is shown; in the two oracles the Divine will on the part of Israel before the new heavens and earth can become a reality is pictured. With both these factors established the groundwork is laid for the final division of the Book. This tells of events more closely associated with the actual passing of the kingdoms of this world into the Kingdom of God. This third division, chapters 9 to 14, is of a fundamentally different style and nature from earlier parts. Where chapters 1 to 6 comprise a succession of symbolic pictures based on past Old Testament literature, and 7 to 8 are hortatory, enshrining principles of Divine Law applicable to any Age and generation, these last chapters 9 to 14 are frankly prophetic, foreseeing the shape of things to come in the logical outworking of events determined on a basis of cause and effect. It is easy, and it is true, to say that the revelation of happenings yet in the future is possible by the power of the Holy Spirit, but it has also to be remembered that the Spirit-filled mind of a man like Zechariah, attuned in a very real sense to the mind of God, was of itself empowered to foresee the outcome, in the future history, of events and forces belonging to his own time. The prophet clearly comprehended the ultimate purpose of God; he understood the manner in which, and the extent to which, the unbelief and the belief, the opposition and the concurrence, of men in his own day and in future times would influence and modify the road by which that goal would eventually be reached, and by that means the Spirit was able to guide him to an appreciation of "things which shall be hereafter" in so definite a fashion that he was able to set down in these chapters so detailed a description of things which had not yet – and in great degree have not yet – transpired.

The striking difference between the two earlier divisions of the Book and this one has led a number of scholars of the "Critical" school to claim that chapters 9 to 14 are not by the Zechariah of the Restoration era but by an unknown writer of much later times. In point of fact, this difference in style is logically to be expected. The first two divisions, written in the second and fourth years of King Darius, are the product of Zechariah's youthful years; he was a man of round about thirty. Chapters 9 to 14 are not dated, but the general background and a certain amount of internal evidence would point to a time nearly half a century later, at the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. It may reasonably be taken that the prophet had reached the maturity and insight of

old age after a lifetime spent "in tune" with God and this in itself amply accounts for the difference in style and the rich colouring of his prophetic vision.

This section commences with an outline sketch of the forces that were to affect Israel after the then present Persian domination had passed away. A new ruling power was to come upon the stage, one that we now know to have been the Greek power, which overthrew Persia. In this crisis Jerusalem was to be preserved, for the good work of the Restoration was still bearing some fruit. Hope of the climax to Israel's expectation would come to the front; the promised King would be manifested and offer himself to the people. But despite Divine assurance that He would indeed ultimately reign, a darker hue is drawn over the scene. Israel apostasises and rejects the King who is also their Shepherd, and for an Age that rejection endures whilst God as it were turns his back upon the unrepentant people. But He has not done so for ever nor even in reality; in the fulness of time and when some through the generations have shewn themselves ready to serve him, God arouses to action.

There is a regathering of his ancient people to their ancient land, a time of opening of eyes and of repentance, and a great cleansing, preparatory to the coming of Messiah and the Millennial Kingdom. Simultaneously there is a moving of powers of evil in the world in opposition, seeking to destroy what seems to be the incipient establishment of the new and righteous world order. The consequence is a further test of faith, a second apostasy and a second rejection of the Shepherd; but a remnant preserves faith and to this remnant the Lord comes in complete and permanent deliverance. So transpires the great event to which all human history has been tending, the revelation of the Lord from Heaven to all mankind, the overthrow of all evil dominating power and the establishment of Divine sovereignty on earth. The glorious vision closes in the spectacle of, not only Israel, but the whole of humankind, delivered from the darkness of sin and death, fully entered at last into the eternal light and life of the illimitable future.

The Book of Zechariah is a remarkable book; remarkable because of its unshakeable confidence in the ultimate execution of the Divine purpose despite the shortcomings and frailty of man. The prophet lived his life in an age that of itself provided a picture in miniature of the glories he foresaw in prophetic vision, but it was an age that, after Zechariah's death, believed its early promise and the light faded into darkness again. He himself in full confidence of faith looked toward a day when the darkness would not return, and in so doing coined, at the close of his book, a phrase which has become immortal; "*At evening time it shall be light*".

To be continued.

AOH

THE PRECIOUS SEED

A seed is planted, and we can trace the process through the growth period to when it bears actual fruit, be it an ear of corn or an apple on a tree. Then comes the harvest and the potential is realised. There is growth and potential in our lives, in our faith and in our relationship with God.

The idea of the seed in scripture speaks not only of a beginning, but also of what that can lead to. Think of the parable of the mustard seed (Mark 4.30-32) *“What can we say that the kingdom of heaven is like?... It is like a mustard seed which at the time is the smallest of all the seeds on earth. Yet once it is sown it grows into the biggest shrub of them all and puts out big branches so that the birds of the air can shelter in its shade.”* The mustard plant is very useful. Faith as a grain of mustard seed can achieve enormous amounts because it looks away from the power of self achievement and looks to God.

God calls on the humble and uses their weakness as his opportunity to show his power and his love. Moses was a prime example. He was the most humble of men as a shepherd in Midian, but out of that humility God made him into a mighty leader.

Every seed has potential. Inside it has the blueprint for the adult plant and all the information it needs to blossom and mature. Growing into the likeness of the Lord Jesus Christ is usually a gradual process. As we walk with him we learn more about him and he will bring more insight and changes to our ways of thinking and feeling, unless we allow the growth to be stifled or overtaken.

A plant drops a seed into the ground and what grows is an approximation of itself. As it grows it spreads its leaves and grows very like the parent plant. You can tell what species it is by looking at it. The likeness of the Saviour grows in us from early beginnings and then grows to full maturity.

1 John 3.7-9 *“Dear children: do not let any one lead you astray. He who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. He who does what is sinful is of the Devil because the Devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work. No-one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God’s seed remains in him.”*

‘God’s seed’ is a picture of human reproduction in which the sperm (the Greek word for seed is *sperma*) bears the life principle and transfers the paternal characteristics. That God’s child cannot go on sinning does not mean that sin stops completely, but living a life not characterised by sin. A part of the Christian life is about growing away from the darkness into the light of God’s righteousness.

A mother with teenage children was talking about the way she related to her offspring as they became more independent. She was asked how it affected her. She said that she realised that as she got older, she herself was 'turning into her mother'. She sometimes was surprised at her attitudes, which were echoing the same attitudes her mother had when she was a teenager. The things that her mother worried about, she worried about. She found that she said things in the same way that her mother had said them. She had inherited more than her physical characteristics, but something of her spirit. That is what John is saying. Because we have been born again in God's spirit, and in a sense have been re-parented, because God has become our Father, we will inherit his characteristics and begin to echo his love of justice, his love of righteousness, his loving attitudes to all people.

When we think of harvest we think of corn. An ear of corn begins as a single seed, and when it grows into full maturity each ear of corn contains many seeds, which can grow into many plants if the conditions are right. The blueprint of the seed has the ability to reproduce itself many times. In Mark 4.20, as part of the explanation of the parable of the sower, Jesus says "And there are those who have been sown in rich soil: they hear the word and accept it and yield a harvest, thirty and sixty and a hundred fold." Isn't it true that every seed in the kingdom of heaven is made to give this same yield?

We were not made to be single seeds but to spread so that there is a greater harvest. The apostles were given the great commission to make disciples of all nations. That commission is still valid. We are meant to be spreaders of the seed so that, in God's providence and in God's way, the kingdom grows.

In each of God's children there is a growing realisation of God's character and his love. Very few have blinding flashes of enlightenment, for most it is a gradual growth in understanding, each according to their capacity to learn about the grace of God.. God sees the potential for spiritual growth in each person, and if that person is willing and ready to accept God's careful tending, then growth will happen. There is no need to be anxious about it. The seed will grow without a doubt. We just have to accept it and let the Holy spirit of God do the work in us. That is the meaning of the parable which tells of the seed that grows by night.

The Christian faith was never meant to be a cause of worrying or fretting, but of peace and poise. If that were not so, why did Jesus say that his yoke was easy and his burden was light? What would peace, in the sense that Jesus uses the word, mean to a worrying man who constantly fretted over his spiritual state? This is not to say there will be no storms to get through: we all know that there will be, but because we recognise that not only is God with us but also within us, we need not be afraid. This is very liberating.

Growth is not about our own efforts, (Jesus said, 'who by taking

thought can add an inch to his height’) although some effort is needed. We can fool ourselves that knowing the gospels and having an understanding is alone responsible for growth. The study of scripture does help us to grow, but it is only the Author of holy scripture that gives us the power to grow. We cannot grow if our understanding of the scriptures is purely academic, and not linked with our relationship with Christ. The scribes and pharisees knew every aspect of the law, but they had forgotten the God who made them. They had substituted their own traditions for a true relationship with God. The law had become more important to them than the God who made them. The rich young ruler was correct in keeping the law, and Jesus loved him, but in a way his growth was stunted because he would not take the ultimate step of giving his all and following Jesus, the author of all true spiritual growth. Is our love for God growing? Are we becoming more loving to others?

The seed is imperishable seed (1 Peter 1.23) *“For you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. For all men are like grass, and all their glory is like the grass of the field: the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands for ever.” “He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created” James.1.18*

Because new birth comes about through the work of the holy spirit and not through man’s efforts, does this mean that we simply sit back and let God do all the work? Not at all. Paul had been urging the stronger churches to give generously to the weaker churches to help and support them. He wrote to the Corinthian congregation and spoke about the promises that they had made, and urged them not to give grudgingly but cheerfully. In 2 Corinthians 9.6-10 he says, *“Remember this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided to give in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things, at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. As it is written, ‘He has scattered abroad his gifts to the poor: his righteousness endures for ever’. Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion.”*

We are to be sowers of seed not reluctantly or stressfully, but with the joy that should be a part of what Watchman Nee calls the normal Christian life. As we give, not just in material giving, but in encouragement, in loving actions, in generosity of spirit, we grow. The seed that is in us, that reflection of god-likeness, grows ever more rich and real. From small beginnings great things can come. The mustard shrub becomes a tree, and its branches reach out and give shelter to others.

JDP

Which Scriptures would *you* choose?

On the theme of 'thankfulness', on one occasion recently it was necessary to choose three scriptures which would give good reasons for being thankful. They could be long but not too long. And they should give teaching which speaks to the heart.

But there was a problem. There are so many passages which speak of God's love and care shown in many different ways.. How could anybody choose just three? It is not as if there are three special scriptures that everybody would agree on. The point was to make one's own choice. What verses would make *me* thankful with my whole heart?

We ask our readers this same question. If you had to choose some passages which made you feel truly thankful, which would they be? If you have a mind to, start thinking, and make your choice. Then you could compare your choice with this writer's choice, which is to be found on page 189.

Concerning the ravages of woodworm

...though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day
2 Cor.4.16

1971. It was a quiet meeting place. In ones or twos the people came to worship, as they had done in this place for centuries. The sun streamed peacefully through ancient casements, lighting upon dark wooden benches, warming a plain floor whose boards had known the reverent tread of many years. Heads bowed, the handful of worshippers maintained a stillness broken only by the sounds of the world outside - a baby wittering in its cot, a motor car droning by, the call of neighbour to neighbour out upon the street. Undisturbed, two insects wandered leisurely over the floor, as if this quiet place were theirs.

Suddenly one realised what these insects were. Tiny holes in the floorboards gave witness to their origin. As one cast one's eyes over the floor another insect came into view, and another... and as for the boreholes, not one hole came into focus, not ten, not a hundred, but a multiplicity, abundant evidence that the solid-seeming boards were riddled, honeycombed with tiny passages, a mere outer shell remaining of what had once been sturdy timber.

Such are the ravages of woodworm, given undisturbed possession. One wondered how long it could go on. As the friends met one morning, would the floor quietly crumble beneath their feet? or would they by then have moved out into their new meeting room which was already being prepared?

Not only upon these friends and their building do the effects of change and decay come, but in different ways upon all of us. Quiet routines of fellowship and worship continue up to a point, and then of a sudden it becomes evident that things are not as they have been in the past. This can apply not only to buildings, but to habits of worship, understandings of scripture, all those traditions that are associated with fellowship in Christ. Change is part of the present order of things, we must accept that, and be prepared. And if the 'woodworm' has been doing its work, and traditions are revealed as an empty husk, are we ready to express our life of fellowship in new ways?

But while new days may bring new ideas, God's purposes and his truth remain, firm, tried and dependable. It is our ideas that may have to be adjusted. What is our place in His purpose at any given location or time? For example, when our country was nominally Christian the task was to uphold His truth in the face of respectable semi-Christian half-truth. But now, is it different in an environment more hostile to faith? Christians who truly believe in Jesus as their Lord and attempt to follow his teaching, can find themselves increasingly thrown together, in a spirit of unity which has nothing to do with churches or organisations. Often there is a desire, perhaps among small groups or households, to meet together, pray together, and rediscover from the Bible just what God is doing, and what is His will in this day and age. Do we need to move on?

One more thought. Moving on to a new home is a picture used in scripture. Paul used the analogy of leaving behind a tent in favour of a more permanent dwelling to describe the change from this life to the next. Although while this age continues the living fellowship of true Christians will continue in some form or other, individually we do not continue indefinitely.. Change and decay will have their way with our bodies... we must face the prospect of moving to new premises. But we are confident that our future dwelling, for ever with the Lord, will be a place of happy service and fellowship, which is proof against 'woodworm' and every such thing.

Thoughts from Midland Newsletter, July 1971

There are vacancies for residential accommodation at Gainsborough House, Milborne Port, Sherborne. Tel 01963 250684. This is a retirement residential centre, with individual flats around a pleasant garden, but also welcomes brethren for short term visits.

Remembering the Books of the Bible

Once upon a time everybody knew the names of all the books of the Bible by heart. At least, that was how it seemed in my young days. It was essential to know all the main books and in what order they came, for our Bible studies involved looking up references from one scripture to another. Admittedly, if there was a reference to one of the minor prophets there might be some scratching of heads and turning of pages, but everyone knew their way about the scriptures. To help us as children learn the names of the books in order, they were set to a tune - it was certainly more fun to learn this way. Some of you may remember doing it in Sunday school.

It still happens. I recently came across a version set to a tune (which was not quite the same as I remembered it). Just in case any of our readers cannot remember all the books of the Bible off pat, we print it here. (If you do not need it, perhaps you can teach it to the children!)

Old Testament

set to the tune *Hursley*, which is 'Sun of my soul' in some hymn books
You may need some practice in fitting the words into each line

Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers,
Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges and Ruth,
Samuel, Samuel, Kings, Kings and Chronicles,
2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther.

Job, Psalms and Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon,
Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel,
Daniel, Hosea, Joel and Amos,
Obadiah, Jonah, then Micah and Nahum
(repeating last two lines)
Habakkuk, Zephaniah and Haggai,
then Zechariah and ending with Malachi.

New Testament

You might try this to 'Onward Christian soldiers'. Warning, it's very tricky.

Matthew, Mark and Luke and John,
Acts, Romans, two of Corinthians, (you have to sing 'Acts' very quickly)
Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians,
Colossians, two of Thessalonians,
Timothy, Timothy, Titus,

Philemon, Hebrews, James,
Peter, Peter, John, John, John,
Jude and the Revelation
(chorus) Onward Christian students
Learning every day
Memorise the Scriptures
And you'll find the Way.

A more logical way of remembering where to find a book, is to think in what *section* of scripture it comes, for example:

Does it belong to: (OT) - Books of Moses - History - Poetry -
Prophecy (NT) Gospels & Acts - Paul's letters - other letters -
Revelation

Over to you!

Causes for thankfulness (from page 186)

It seemed a good idea to choose one scripture each for past, present and future. The one chosen for the past speaks of God's forgiveness and steadfast love for us, a foundation on which to build our lives. In the present, believers can receive the overwhelming blessing that Paul prayed for, to be filled with all the fulness of God. Then, as we look to the future, though we are not expected to know all the details, we can revel in the hope of God dwelling with men. Here are the scriptures we chose. Your choice very likely is quite different!

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me bless his holy name! Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's

The Lord works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed. He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel. The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in

steadfast love. He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger for ever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor requite us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. As a father pities his children, so the Lord pities those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust.

As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more. But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting upon those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children, to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments.

The Lord has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all. Bless the Lord, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his word, hearkening to the voice of his word! Bless the Lord, all his hosts, his ministers that do his will! Bless the Lord, all his works, in all places of his dominion. Bless the Lord, O my soul!
Psalm 103

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with might through his Spirit in the inner man, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fulness of God. Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.
Ephesians 3.14-21

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a great voice from the throne saying "Behold the dwelling of God is with men.

He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.” And he who sat upon the throne said, “Behold, I make all things new.”
Revelation 21.1-5

A Note on 1 Peter 3.19, 20

Sometimes one finds a really unusual translation of a verse. For example, there is James Moffatt’s version of 1 Peter 3.19: “It was in the Spirit that *Enoch* also went and preached to the imprisoned spirits who had disobeyed at the time when God’s patience held out during the construction of the ark... “

Peter had been speaking about Jesus, who ‘died for sin once for all, a just man for unjust men, that he might bring us near to God: in the flesh he was put to death, but he came to life in the spirit.’ Then Moffatt’s version goes on, ‘it was in the Spirit that *Enoch*’... Enoch, not ‘he’, meaning Jesus, as other versions have it. Why would Moffatt put this?

Some people find a problem in understanding that Jesus did this. When did He preach to the spirits in prison, and who were they? A common interpretation is that they were the fallen angels of Genesis 6.1-4 who had sexual relations with human beings and produced a race of giants. If it was to them that Jesus preached how did Peter know about it? When did it happen - before ever the Word came to dwell among men? or after Calvary? It does not seem to fit in with the straightforward account of Jesus Christ redeeming humankind.

There was, however, a story which Peter would have known, about someone who went and preached to the fallen angels. It is found in the Book of Enoch. This book is a work of pious fiction compiled by Jewish writers in the time before Christ. It is one of the pseudepigrapha, stories written in the names of historical characters but not necessarily true, which were read by religious people but were not accepted as God’s truth in the canon of scripture, and did not even get into the Apocrypha. But Peter would have known the story. It gives an account in some detail of the sins of the angels

and their names, how they were imprisoned and Enoch went to them.

Suppose that Peter in his letter was intending to say this about Enoch, then why did he say *he* (meaning Jesus)? Dr Moffatt follows the theory that Peter did put 'Enoch', but that a copyist left it out. This would imply that while: ...ENOKAITOISENTHULAKEPNEUMASI.... was the copy, it would have originally readENOKAIENOXTOISENTHULAKEPNEUMASI.... It is easy when copying to miss out repeated letters. So, Enoch? or Jesus Christ?

This discussion raises the question of the inspiration of the text of scripture. Would God allow there to be mistakes? Scholars know of many little differences between the various old manuscripts in the original Greek which have been preserved, so mistakes must have happened. Do they matter? For those of us who humbly read and try to understand God's Word, probably not very much. Our calling is not to understand everything perfectly, only to be faithful to our Lord.

DIVES AND LAZARUS

A dispensational exposition of the parable

"Ye cannot serve God and Mammon" said Jesus. The listening Pharisees derided him when they heard that saying; they had, in their own opinion, long since learned how to make the best of both worlds. It is likely that the complacent smiles were quickly swept off their arrogant faces when Jesus proceeded to relate the story of Dives and Lazarus .

The account is preserved only in the 16th chapter of Luke's Gospel. There was a certain rich man, said Jesus, who was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day. And there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, who was laid at his gate.

So far the story ran true to everyday experience. Beggars squatting at the outer portals of rich men's houses were a familiar enough sight in the days of Jesus. They existed on such bounty as the householders chose to give them, supplemented by the charity of passers by. This particular beggar was like so many of them, a pitiable wreck of a man , clothed in rags, disease-ridden, his only companions the carrion dogs which were always prowling about the city and like him existing on such scraps of food as came their way. The Pharisees in the group listened to these opening words with barely concealed indifference: the situation was one with which they were thoroughly familiar

and which they considered a normal feature of society. No reason existed for trying for trying to change it or mitigate its evils. So they listened with only detached interest.

But the next words brought them up with a jolt. The beggar died, and was carried into Abraham's bosom. He was buried and found himself in Hades.

Eyebrows contracted and lips were pursed at this. There is a story in the Babylonian Talmud, a story with which those Pharisees were certainly familiar, of somewhat similar character, but in that story the Pharisee is taken into the joys of the presence of God and the publican is condemned to the torment of thirst. It is fairly evident that Jesus, who also must have been familiar with the same old legend, deliberately based this parable upon that story but reversed the respective fates of the two characters.

Knowing that, it is easy to see that this parable is intended to show up the utter unworthiness of the Pharisees and the nation they represented, their ultimate loss of all the good things they enjoyed as the "chosen nation", and the reception into Divine favour of those previously outside the pale.

The traditional Jewish background of the story is very noticeable. There is no mention of God the Father nor of Christ the Son; no reference to Heaven the home of the faithful of Christ, the earthly Messianic Kingdom which is to be the "desire of all nations", or the Atonement, by means of which salvation comes to man. Instead, we have Abraham, Moses and the prophets, angels, "Abraham's bosom", and Hades, all essentially matters of Jewish interest. The Hades of the parable is not the Old Testament Hades (*sheol* – the grave) but the Hades of Rabbinic speculation, modelled after Greek thought rather than Hebrew. There is no reason therefore for thinking that the parable has anything to teach about the future and wicked after death. There is nothing said about the moral standing of the two characters. Lazarus is not said to be righteous nor Dives wicked. (The name "Dives", often applied to the rich man but not appearing in the A.V., is the Latin for "rich man" and comes from the early Latin Bibles in Britain). And even if Lazarus is conceded to be righteous there is no justification for assuming that the expression "Abraham's bosom" is synonymous with Heaven.

How then can we apply this parable? The rich man was a picture of the Pharisees and, by extension, the whole of the unbelieving Jewish nation. For more than a thousand years they had been the chosen people of God "*to be a light to the Gentiles, to declare his salvation to the ends of the earth*". By virtue of the Covenant made at Sinai they were guaranteed all possible material blessings, "blessed in basket and in store", safety from their enemies, and the privilege of being God's blessing to all families of the earth should come. In symbolic language, they were clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day. In that position the Pharisees boasted themselves. "*We be Abraham's seed, and were never in bondage to any man.*".

That order of things came to an end when Jesus declared "Your house is left unto you desolate" and when, having rejected and crucified the Lord of glory, the favoured position of Israel came to an utter and disastrous end in the overthrow of the nation directly after the Crucifixion, and its dispersal among the nations. Truly "*the rich man died and was buried.*"

Lazarus, on the contrary, enjoyed an improvement of status. His life of misery came to an end and he found himself transported into "Abraham's bosom". The allusion has two explanatory instances in the Gospels. To lie in the bosom of a superior or a friend was a mark of great favour; the custom of reclining a meals with each person's head in the bosom of his neighbour implied that the one next to the host was to be envied. At the Last Supper it is John who is found to be "*leaning on Jesus' bosom*" (Jno. 13. 23). Jesus himself, in his close relationship with the Father, is said to be "*the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father*" (Jno. 1. 18.) So with Lazarus; he is translated, not to Heaven, but to a position of close relationship with Abraham. The fact makes it fairly obvious that Jesus is alluding to the truth He uttered in such plain terms when on another occasion He said to these same Pharisees, again as representing their nation, "*the kingdom of God is taken from you and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof.*" (Matt. 21.43).

Lazarus is intended to picture the despised and outcast Gentiles who at last enter into the high calling of God, as they did do under the preaching of the Apostles, becoming spiritual children of Abraham (Gal. 3. 7-8). The eleventh chapter of Romans makes it clear that the fruitless olive branches were broken off and wild olive branches (i.e. the Gentiles) were grafted in. Lazarus in Abraham's bosom pictures the Christian Church of all nations and peoples classed as children of Abraham and hence, as Galatians declares, "*heirs according to the promise*".

In the meantime the rich man is in Hades "*in torments*". This used to be a "key" text to urge the reality of the "everlasting fires", but critical study soon shows that this position cannot reasonably be maintained. The word rendered "hell" here is "hades", the death state, not "*gehenna*", which is final doom. Hades is a temporary condition, for the time will come that Death and Hades are to be cast into the lake of fire (Rev. 20. 13-14), i.e. be themselves destroyed or brought to an end. Another and a most important consideration is that the sojourn of Dives in Hades begins to have a remedial effect; the one who in his lifetime gave evidence of inherent selfishness and lack of consideration for others in that Lazarus only got the crumbs which fell from his table is now displaying concern for the fate of his brothers. "*I have five brethren; (send Lazarus) that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment.*" He still calls Abraham "Father" and the latter still calls him "Son" (vs. 25) which does not look as if the rich man's case is hopeless.

The word rendered "torment" in vss. 23 and 28 "*in hades he lifted his eyes, being in torments*" is from "*basanos*" which properly denotes a touchstone or stone (basonite), used for testing gold. Genuine gold, rubbed on this particular kind of stone, left a characteristic mark, hence the word at first indicated the trial or test of genuineness. Since judicial trial in ancient times almost always employed torture to extract confessions, the word when used judicially came to mean "torture", hence the translation "torment" in this instance. That it need not carry this meaning is shown by other occurrences of the word in the New Testament, such as:

Matt. 8. 6. "Sick of the palsy, grievously *tormented*".

Matt. 4. 24. "Sick persons...divers diseases and *torments*."

Mark 6. 48. "He saw them *toiling* in rowing".

Matt. 14. 24. "Midst of the sea, *tossed* with waves."

The rich man, then, during his sojourn in Hades, is undergoing a severe, harrowing trial which nevertheless must come to an end sometime because Hades itself is but a temporary condition. That is an apt symbol of Israel's "Hades" experience during the period between the First and Second Advents. Scattered among all nations, deprived of citizenship and country of her own, she has been the victim of oppression and cruelty in every land.

But God has declared that He will eventually restore Israel to a destined place in his purposes where she shall fulfil her original destiny to convey Divine blessing to me. "*Arise, shine, for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee...and the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising.*" (Isa. 60. 1,3).

The word "tormented" in vss. 24 and 25 is from "*odunomai*" which signifies anguish, pain or distress of any kind, as in:

Luke 2. 48. "Thy father and I have sought thee *sorrowing*."

Acts 20. 38. "*Sorrowing* most of all."

Rom. 9. 2. "Continual *sorrow* in my heart."

1 Tim. 6. 10. "Pierced through with many *sorrows*."

So the rich man in his distress beheld Lazarus enjoying the felicity of communion with Abraham and cried out for some small moiety of relief. "*Send Lazarus that he may...cool my tongue, for I am tormented in this flame.*" And Abraham had to tell him that what he asked was impossible. "*Between us and you there is a great gulf (Gr. Chasma) fixed*" a chasm which effectually precluded any passage from the one side to the other. It was not that Abraham *would* not relieve; it was that he *could* not.

What is the gulf? As regards the people of Israel, it is the immutable purpose of God! When the Most High decrees judgment, none can set it aside. From the day that the unreasoning crowd cried "*His blood be upon us and upon our children*" (Matt. 27.25) the Jewish nation entered into a condition

from which they cannot and will not be delivered until in the outworking of the Divine Plan the *“fulness of the Gentiles be come in”* (Rom. 11. 25). When, at the end of this Age, the Christian Church is complete and joined to her Lord in Heaven, and the “residue of men” (Acts 15. 17) are ready to “seek after the Lord”, then will God *“build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down”* (Acts 15. 16) and manifest a restored and purified Israel nation in the midst of the earth to play its own destined part in the evangelising of the world.

The parable does not go that far, for there is still one lesson, the most solemn lesson of all, to be taught, and Jesus would fain leave the Pharisees with that word. The rich man was concerned about his his brethren; he wanted one from the dead to go to them that in the wonder of that happening they might find conviction. *“They have Moses and the prophets”* said Abraham *“Let them hear them”*. True enough; Israel always had Moses and the prophets, and Christ said that if they had rightly heard Moses and the prophets they would have believe him, for in those writings lay the evidence of his Messiahship.

The rich man dissented; even though his brethren rejected Moses and the prophets – and he did not dispute the fact of their having done so – yet a visitation from the dead would convince them. That gave the opportunity for one of the most telling phrases which ever fell from the lips of Jesus. *“If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rise from the dead”* (vs. 31). The whole history of Israel, from the First Advent until now, is evidence of the truth of that word. Jesus rose from the dead; they still did not believe!

The parable ends with the rich man still in Hades. But Abraham called him “Son” and he called Abraham “Father”; and Hades will one day pass away. So there is a bright gleam behind the dark horizon of the picture. There is still hope.

AOH

Is it wrong to be rich?

When we read the story of Dives and Lazarus, it seems at first that Dives, the rich man, is simply condemned for being rich. It makes a very pointed story that the situations of beggar and plutocrat are reversed after death.

Scripture often speaks against the rich. Without making a study of it, one calls readily to mind Jesus’ saying concerning the ‘Rich Fool’ who at death lost all the possessions he had gathered together, or the case of the ‘Rich Young Ruler’ whose possessions prevented him from becoming a disciple, or

the severe words found in James chapter 5.

“And now, you rich people, listen to me! Weep and wail over the miseries that are coming upon you! Your riches have rotted away, and your clothes have been eaten by moths. Your gold and silver are covered with rust, and this rust will be a witness against you and will eat up your flesh like fire. You have piled up riches for these last days. You have not paid any wages to the men who work in your fields. Listen to their complaints! The cries of those who gather in your crops have reached the ears of God, the Lord Almighty.....” (Jas. 5.1-4 GNB)

Is it the case that the possession of riches inevitably has a corrupting effect? Or is the question at issue not the possession of riches but how they are obtained, and how they are used.

A commentary has this to say about Dives in the story.

“Why is Dives so uncompromisingly condemned? He was not obviously a bad or cruel man. He is not said to have been deliberately cruel to Lazarus. He did not, as it were, kick him in the passing; he did not order him to be removed from his gate; he seems even to have been perfectly willing that Lazarus should be fed with the hunks of wasted bread that fell from his table.

“The sin of Dives was simply this - he accepted Lazarus as part of the landscape and of the permanent conditions of life. He accepted the fact without question that he himself should move in purple and fine linen and fare sumptuously every day while Lazarus should lie, starving and full of sores, at his gate. He could look at Lazarus and feel no answering sword of grief or pity pierce his heart. It never even dawned on him that it had anything to do with him. It was nothing to him as he passed by. His condemnation is the condemnation of the man who saw the piteous pageant of the world's need and who never even felt that he should do something about it. And what made his sin worse was that need and suffering were on his own doorstep.” (Barclay, in ‘And Jesus Said’)

Jesus taught that when He comes to reign, those who are chosen to possess the kingdom will be those who cared for the poor, using their possessions to do so. It is a challenge for us, who perhaps are not very rich and yet are not completely destitute. Do we have the wisdom to understand, in our own situation, in what ways we can best obey His teaching?

Steward or owner?

Do you consider yourself a *steward* of your money and property, or are you the *owner* of it? The right, scriptural way to look on yourself is as a steward, not an owner. The time is coming when our stewardship will end. Then we

shall enter into the possession of what is our true inheritance.

The steward has to give an account of his stewardship. This is not to say that our salvation depends on our conduct as stewards, for we are saved by grace, grace alone, and not by works. But this very fact should make us earnestly grateful, and show our gratitude by consistent conduct.

What is appropriate for us is to be *faithful* stewards. This brings its reward here and now to a great extent, while we are living. In the world to come the reward given by grace will be proportionate to our faithfulness in this life.

Thoughts based on George Muller, 1880.

The Temptation to feel that people are not worth loving

The world is lamentably short of outgoing love. Part of the reason for this is because it is so much easier to love among our own circle, or at least to love those who will return our love. Although we do not express it in so many words. I believe that one of the reasons why so few people venture to give themselves for the sake of other people is because they feel that "people are not really worth it". But who are we, who call ourselves Christians, "saved", ... "the Church" ? In what way do we think we were "worth it", when Christ visited this earth to save us? In the eyes of Heaven this whole sin-infected, blundering human race could hardly have seemed worthy of the highest sacrifice which God could make for its redemption. Yet love took the initiative and bore unspeakable contradiction, misunderstanding, and humiliation to win us to Himself. To quote John's words, "if God so loved us we ought also to love one another".

This sense of first being loved and then being willing to give oneself in love is the secret of a life such as that of Paul. I mention Paul simply because we know a fair amount about his life, but there must have been hundreds of others whose names we do not even know who gave themselves similarly in love to the world around them; yet how rare is that love found in the church today among its ordinary members. Thank God, there are exceptions in all the churches, men and women who will go into the dark and messy situations of human life to bring the light and order of Christ. There are at this moment thousands of such people scattered throughout the world - doctors, nurses, pastors, teachers, social workers of all kinds - who make tremendous sacrifices because they are impelled by the love of Christ. But they are a tiny minority compared with the membership figures of all the churches.... The real lack is the lack of love. Not enough people have realised the love of God and his tremendous purpose. Not enough have so experienced His love that they are prepared to love other people at considerable personal cost...

J B Phillips in New Testament Christianity 1958

The Hope of a Victorian Schoolmaster

"God is working His purpose out." We would all agree with that, it is what Paul said in Ephesians, "the purpose which He has cherished in His own mind of restoring the whole creation to find its one Head in Christ" (1.10, Weymouth). The same purpose is expressed in Isaiah 11 - a time when human beings would not hurt or destroy. They would be under the control of One who is termed 'a shoot from Jesse's roots' - a ruler who is wise, powerful, perfectly informed, just, capable of eliminating all that is hurtful. The earth will become as full of the knowledge of God's glory as the sea is full of water.

This is the theme of the notable hymn by Arthur Campbell Ainger. Ainger, born in 1841 and son of a clergyman, went to Eton, the elite public school. It was at the same school he made his career. He became a housemaster there in 1870, and remained until 1901, when he retired (and Queen Victoria died). He was involved in setting up the Old Etonians Association, in publishing an English/Latin verse dictionary, in writing a book about his early days at Eton 60 years previously, and he wrote hymns.

The best known one is, *"God is working His purpose out"*, with its last line *"When the earth shall be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea."* Many, many Christians have cherished this promise, found in Isaiah 11.9. For example, there was an elderly sister, her faculties beginning to fail, who whenever you met her could be guaranteed to repeat these words which meant so much to her. And then there was the prophet Habakkuk. Why did he suddenly insert these same words right in the middle of five woes of condemnation against wicked oppressors? Perhaps to remind us that the wickedness in the world is not God's fault, and He has something much better in mind for everybody.

Where Ainger is wrong in his hymn is in the way and the time he expected this hope to be fulfilled. He said, a hundred and more years ago, *'The time is drawing near'*. He expected that the spread of the glorious gospel of truth over every continent, by means of willing missionaries, would have the effect of bringing God's purpose to fruition, that the fight against sorrow and sin would be victorious. There have indeed been victories, the host of faithful Christians continues to increase, but the end is not yet. Ainger himself lived until the time of the 'Great War' (1914-18), which must have tested his faith, and a hundred years on we are still waiting for his hope to be realised.

Ainger could see that all the missionary effort was worth nothing unless God gave His blessing. The seed would produce no harvest unless He put life in it. There is no doubt there has been a blessing - the blessing of His Spirit upon those whom He is calling, and a blessing upon the people around them

whom they in turn have been able to help and influence. But the time for the universal kingdom is not yet - we still wait for the King to come. Yet the time is nearer than when any of us first believed. "*Nearer and nearer grows the time, the time that shall surely be....*"

Among the other hymns that Ainger wrote is a harvest hymn, not often sung today. The tune is by Joseph Barnby (with whom Ainger also collaborated on the Eton School Song. Barnby also wrote tunes which are still sung, such as the marriage hymn '*O perfect love*', and the tune to '*When morning gilds the skies, my heart awakening cries, may Jesus Christ be praised*'.) While this harvest hymn gives thanks for the flowers and fruit which crown the year, it also has the theme of 'the harvest of bygone ages' - all those faithful people in the past who passed on to us their knowledge of God and His ways. God's faithful dealings with His people in the past are a sure foundation for our faith now, just as His faithfulness also gives hope for coming days.

Let all our brethren join in one
To lift the heart and voice,
The Lord hath done great things for us,
And therefore we rejoice:

*For the harvest of bygone ages,
In the hope of the coming days,
Go into His gates with thankfulness,
And into His courts with praise.*

We with our ears have heard the tale,
The tale our fathers told,
What wonders God for them and us
Did in the time of old.
Man sowed the seed and watered it
In sorrow and in care;
But God alone the increase gave
And bade it blossom fair.
All praise to Him whose bounty crowns
With flowers and fruit the year;
God is our hope and strength today,
Therefore we will not fear.

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*The Holy Spirit descended upon
him in bodily form, as a dove.*

Luke 3.22

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The Bible Study Monthly is published to promote knowledge of the Bible. It sees the Scriptures as a true record of God's dealings with the human race, needing to be understood in our generation. It looks for the advent of our Lord, and His reign of peace and justice on the earth. "*Speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into Him who is the head, into Christ*" (Ephesians 4:15 NRSV)

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THE HOLY SPIRIT APPEARS

The Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form, as a dove. Luke 3.22

* * * At the fords where the River Jordan was shallow, John the Baptist had been baptising those who came to him. After the rush of people there came his cousin, Jesus, who he did not know well. There was some discussion between them. John consented to baptise Jesus, and then it happened..... John's account was, "I saw the Spirit come down like a dove from heaven, and it rested on him." Jesus saw too. While he was praying after his baptism, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit came down upon him in bodily form like a dove, and there was a voice. It said to him, "You are my own dear Son. I am pleased with you." (John 1.32, Luke 3.21-2, Matthew 3.16,17).

For the Holy Spirit to appear as a *dove* was no surprise. Jewish scholars had supposed that when the Spirit had hovered over the waters at the time of creation, it had been like a dove. That same powerful Spirit now came down, in one spot in all the vast world, upon a newly baptised human being - Jesus.

The Spirit drove him into the wilderness, where he was tested. It was in the Spirit that he returned from the wilderness to begin his work, healing. To the congregation in a synagogue in Nazareth he announced, "The Spirit of the

Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.... release to the captives... sight to the blind... liberty to those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.” He quoted the words of Isaiah written in times long ago, back in history.

* * * Three years later, in Jerusalem it is Festival time, the streets are busy with Jews from all parts of the world assembled for the Feast of the Fiftieth Day. Indoors, together in one place a large group of disciples is gathered, praying. There comes the sound of a *gale* blowing from heaven, filling the house. Tongues of *fire* appear resting on each one of them. It is the Holy Spirit. They go outside and speak to all the crowds, who without difficulty hear what is said in their own language. The disciples tell the news that Jesus, crucified a few weeks previously, dead and buried, is in fact not dead. He was dead, but he is alive, raised by God’s power. The people must repent of his death, and obey him. And lives will change.

* * * A little earlier, Jesus was suddenly present there in a room with his disciples, though the doors had been locked shut. The disciples, frightened, overawed, inspect his damaged body. It is really him, their Master. He eats a piece of fish. He gently *breathes* on them. “Receive the Holy Spirit.” This was what Jesus had told them only four days earlier, they would be given another Helper to be in his place, when he was no longer walking alongside them. They would be guided to use the same authority that Jesus had showed in dealing with the sin of people who they encountered along the way.

* * * It was some time earlier, well before the end of his ministry, that Jesus had been teaching in the temple court. It was the Feast of Tabernacles, the last day, the great day of the feast. The scriptures appropriate to the occasion had been read. Zechariah 14.8 “*When that day comes, running waters will issue from Jerusalem, half to the eastern sea, half to the western sea, summer and winter alike.*” Ezekiel 47 : Ezekiel was brought back to the entrance of the temple. A stream came out from under the temple threshold, and flowed to the east, increasing to become a great river. And now Jesus called out “If any man is thirsty, let him come to me! Let the man come and drink who believes in me. As scripture says, whoever believes in me, streams of life-giving water shall flow from his heart.” By streams of *water*, Jesus really meant the Spirit which those who believed in him were to receive (John 7.39). The water was to flow, bringing life, not from a place but from each person who believed.

* * * Peter was sure that the Spirit came as a *gift* (Acts 2.38). Jesus had

told him, and all the twelve, that the Holy Spirit was a gift they could request from God with full confidence (Luke 11.13). Peter's answer to the guilt felt among the crowds on the day of Pentecost, who asked 'What have we got to do?', was "Each one of you must turn away from his sins and be baptised in the name of Jesus, so that your sins will be forgiven - and you will receive God's gift, the Holy Spirit." The Spirit could not be controlled, or paid for with money. Peter was deeply shocked when Simon Magus tried to buy what was God's sovereign gift (Acts 8.20). Furthermore, Peter knew that when God gave this gift, He was accepting the person who received it. Cornelius and his non-Jewish friends had received it, with the same results as at Pentecost - speaking in strange tongues, praise of God's greatness. Peter explained (Acts 11.17) that this was proof that God was accepting these foreigners.

* * * Again and again we hear of people who are said to be *filled* with the Holy Spirit. Jesus himself (Luke 4.1), John the Baptist (Luke 1.15), Elizabeth his mother (Luke 1.41), his father Zechariah (Luke 1.67), all the believers (Acts 2.4), Peter (Acts 4.8), Paul (Acts 9.17), Barnabas (Acts 11.24). Each time when they do or say things which are beyond what they might say or do in the ordinary way, it is God's Spirit in action. Whether the expression to describe it is 'filled' or 'anointed' or 'baptised', it is an overwhelming experience. It may be at some special time, or may characterise a whole life. A modern analogy might be a light bulb, or a computer, which comes to life when the electric current surges into it.

* * * * * The time had come, in the working out of God's great purpose, the time for the Word of God to become flesh. Picture a small town among hills. Picture a little province of the Roman empire, a land where a race of people had for a thousand years maintained an intermittent contact with their God. Picture a girl, grown up among a family of believing people. A girl who was ready. Also, try dimly to understand One who was about to exchange the form of God for the form of a servant (Philippians 2), ready to be 'sent forth' to be born of a woman (Galatians 4).

Mary was ready, but she could not understand. How could she be mother to the Son of the Most High? "Spirit Holy will come upon you. Power of the Most High will be like a shadow over you. The child to be born of you will be called holy, the Son of God." And there in her womb was the microscopic seed. It would grow.... and be born, and live, and die.... and so doing, save all the peoples of our world.

GC

WHAT IS GOD'S WILL?

"God wants you to be holy " (1 Thess.4.3 GNB)

Paul was writing about the ultimate purpose of God. It is a direct command of God that his people shall be cleansed and made ready for his future work. It is a process by which his people can express already now his love for all mankind and especially his concern for those who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Only in doing this can they be changed into his likeness. So how does this affect our day to day, minute by minute, experiences in life?

God gave to the people Israel a law which revealed his will for them in fairly detailed terms. That law was interpreted by priests and prophets so that men and women could understand what was a good moral behaviour. Jesus' life and teaching did the same for Christians, assisted by apostles and teachers. In this twenty-first century, in an affluent and democratic society, these basic principles are unchanged. The problems of making decisions and facing temptations are a little more complex than they were in the days of Jesus, or Abraham, but an examination of the means by which God revealed himself in Bible times provides clues as to how He might do so today.

The most important factor in discovering the will of God is our relationship to him. That is a friendship which demands complete penitence of heart, and total surrender of our will to him (Rom. 12. 1-2). Constant prayerful meditation upon the Bible enables this relationship to develop into a consciousness of God which will affect everything we say and do. We find that the Word of God contains many examples of the way in which He spoke to his people of old and it is fascinating to notice the number of times that God's message was the opposite of human inclinations. Some, like Abraham or Moses, seem to argue with him (Gen. 17-18; Exod. 3-4). The revelation to them must have been very clear, leaving no doubt about God's intention.

The way in which Abraham's servant discovered a bride for Isaac is an interesting example of God's communication (Gen. 24), but how different was Jacob's experience (Gen. 28-35). He went back to the land Isaac was forbidden to go to, chose one of his wives and was married to the other by deception.

There is also a contrast in determining God's will in the lives of two exiles wanting to return to Jerusalem. Nehemiah was escorted by a military guard, while Ezra believed that this was not God's will for him (Neh. 2. 9; Ezra 8. 22). God has revealed himself in different ways to different people all through history. So we can see that sitting in judgment of others in this matter will not make it easier for any child of God to interpret his will more clearly. Patient waiting upon God will.

The central goal of Jesus' life was to do his Father's will. It was his

food and drink and He taught his disciples to pray for it. When He came to his last great ordeal and He prayed to God about it, it was only what He had done at other critical times in his life.

It is also clear that God gives us liberty in the making of decisions. That is the reason for some of the disagreements which occurred in New Testament times, beautifully summarised in Rom. 14. The colour of our coat, or the way we cook our food may not affect our own Christian life. Nevertheless there are guiding principles which as stewards of God's gifts we shall need to observe, bearing in mind the needs of others and our responsibility to God. The way we plan our day and choose our activities will be qualified by whether it is God's will (James 4.13-17).

George Muller of Bristol said that discovery of God's will could be likened to a captain navigating his ship into harbour. At one port around the British coasts there were three lights and when the helmsman steered his ship so that all three lights were lined up one behind the other, he knew that he was on course to enter the harbour. So the Christian may line up three important factors in life's experiences and when they agree there is good reason to move forward. They are; the inner conviction of the Holy Spirit within our hearts; the circumstances of our lives; and prayerful thoughts upon the Word of God. Others have witnessed to the fact that this is how they discover the will of God.

What job do I take? What house do I buy? Where should I go for a holiday? What book should I read? Should I join a club? As a Christian may I have a hobby? These are the kind of questions which children of God must answer for themselves. It is disobedience to the Word of God to pass harsh judgment upon other believers. We do know that God wants every soul surrendered to him, to use his or her gifts for his Kingdom. Therefore in our job we should be serving the interests of God's Kingdom, (not just paying the expenses of our earthly life). Whichever house we live in (rented or bought), it will be a home we share with God. The touchstone in all these questions is whether or not we can do it to the glory of God.

Living with a consciousness of God's presence every day and trusting that He will lead us to do those things he wants us to do, we will avoid anxiety and arrogance concerning the decisions we take. It will help us to develop confidence, obedience and a sensitivity to the Divine leading such as a child has in its father's or mother's strong grasp.

DN

ARMAGEDDON

This is only one of the Old Testament pictures used in the Revelation to encode a prophecy of the coming change in the world order

The word has a chilling sound. In the popular mind it conjures up visions of war and tumult, destruction and slaughter, a holocaust of fire and death, the end of all things. It is one of the few Biblical words which survive in everyday language. Any great political crisis or threat of world wide war is almost invariably referred to as " Armageddon" .

A certain amount of uninformed Bible exposition has contributed to this habit. The colourful symbols of the Book of Revelation are often interpreted in far more literal a manner than is justified, and the "scare tactics" employed by a few Christian groups more obsessed with retributive vengeance upon sinners than the Divine desire and plan to save them from their sin has tended to over emphasise the destructive element in this very real event in human history and minimise the constructive factor. Both are included; unless that fact is understood the full significance of the Scriptural presentation of Armageddon will not be appreciated.

The word occurs only once in Scripture - Rev.16. 16 - and it is veiled in a certain obscurity, which is very understandable when one considers the circumstances under which the relevant passage was written. It dealt with the ultimate, but certain, overthrow of the powers of evil of this world and their supersession by the Kingdom of God. Inflammatory material indeed at a time when the then ruling world power, the Roman Empire, had decided the Christian society was a danger to the State and must be eliminated. Therefore this Book of Revelation was written in terms of Old Testament history and prophecy in such fashion that whereas to the uninitiated it would seem to be merely a farrago of nonsense, to Christians conversant with the Old Testament the allusions would be understood and the meaning decipherable.

The general theme of the Book of Revelation is the conflict between good and evil which began, so far as the book is concerned, with the birth of Christ at Bethlehem and is concluded at the end of the Millennial Age when all evil is eliminated and mankind, fully reconciled to God in Christ, has achieved its destiny. In this picture the disciples of Christ of this Age, the Church, are shown as waging a good warfare against the hosts of evil and enduring martyrdom for their faith, emerging triumphant on the "other side". The powers of evil, and all in the world who support those powers, move inevitably into a harvest of their own sowing in which all they have built through the centuries comes crashing down in total disruption because it has

been built on evil principles and evil is inherently unstable and cannot endure. They have sown dragon's teeth and reap accordingly. And this is the time that the Lord Christ, with his resurrected martyr-disciples, returns to take his great power and reign over the earth - an event which marks the transition from the present Gospel Age to the future Millennial Age. This event, combining both the downfall of the "kingdoms of this world" and the establishment of the Kingdom of God, is Armageddon.

Both these factors are included in this passage in Revelation but it will be helpful to take a look at the background first. For several chapters back the Revelator has been tracing the conflict between good and evil, from the birth of Jesus through the Age, until in chapter 14 he sees a representation of the great event which closes this Age and challenges the institutional powers of evil to mortal combat. That event is the Second Advent of Christ, and the Revelator casts it in the guise of Daniel's vision where Daniel sees the Son of Man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory, to witness the overthrow and destruction of great wild beasts representing earth's empires, and to set up his own kingdom which shall never pass away (Dan. 7). Now John in his 14th chapter also sees this Son of Man coming on a cloud, but he adds some additional detail. There are two harvests to be reaped, one the "*harvest of the earth*", of wheat, for He wields a golden sickle for the purpose, and the other the vintage, of the "*vine of the earth*", which is to be cast into the "*winepress of the wrath of God*". The interpretation is not difficult. The wheat harvest is the Lord's gathering of his Church at his coming, as also pictured in the parable of the wheatfield in Matt. 13. Following this translation of these faithful and watchful believers to heavenly conditions comes the overthrow of evil pictured by the vintage, in which the "vine of the earth" is reaped and cast into the winepress. This goes back to Isaiah 63 where the conquering Lord is pictured as treading the winepress in his irresistible progress toward the establishment of his Kingdom.

This general outline of chapter 14 is amplified in chaps. 15-19 by the insertion of detailed news of certain aspects of the process. In chapter 15 the "*sanctuary of the tabernacle of the testimony in heaven*" is opened, and seven angels bearing "*the seven last plagues*" come forth. The "tabernacle of the testimony" is, of course, the Mosaic tabernacle in the wilderness at the time of the Exodus, the ritual centre of the Levitical ceremonial law. The sanctuary or "Most Holy" of that structure was normally closed to mortal sight, only the High Priest being permitted to enter, but there were occasions when the supernatural Shekinah light which illuminated its interior, the "glory of the Lord", blazed out in the sight of all Israel in demonstration of Divine judgment against some blatant wickedness. One such occasion was at the rebellion of

Korah and his followers (Num. 16) when the plague decimated Israel in consequence. This is the allusion here. The end of the Age has come, the Lord comes both to take his Church to himself and to destroy evil and set up his kingdom, and all this at the time in human history when the apostasy and unbelief and rebellion of man has involved them in inevitable world disaster and ruin, aptly described here in Revelation as the "*seven last plagues*". These "plagues" are not heaven-sent; they are the logical and certain consequence of man's own course and actions, but they are pictured as emanating from the Divine sanctuary because they are Heaven's laws that have been transgressed and Heaven pronounces the judgment. The same principle is exemplified at an earlier time in history when Israel went into captivity to Babylon on account of the joint sin of princes, priests and people, and the Lord said "*their own way I recompensed upon their heads*" (Ezek. 22. 31).

So this 16th chapter, which contains the reference to Armageddon, is devoted to a description of the coming of these plagues upon the world at the end of the Age. The first, the infliction of foul disease upon the supporters of the evil powers, an allusion probably to the leprosy which struck Miriam, Gehazi, and Uzziah, in each case following sacrilege or rebellion, might fitly picture the unbelief, irreligion and general rejection of God which has characterised this "end-of-the-Age" period and to which so many of earth's present ills are directly due. Very few will dispute that we now live in a sick society. The next three are the time honoured symbols of pestilence, war, and famine. Our Lord said that these three plagues would afflict the world in redoubled measure at the "Time-of-the-End" and here the Revelator sees the sea become blood so that all life dies, a fit symbol of pestilence; the rivers and streams run blood, a symbol of universal warfare; the sun's heat increased to scorch the earth and men upon it, a picture of famine. All these plagues are with us today - famine, pollution and war are in the forefront of the great problems which face the world's leaders.

All this leads logically to the fifth plague, the undermining of the controlling centre of the powers of evil. This means, in effect, the approach to imminent collapse of the present world order. Jesus foresaw the same thing when He uttered the historic words "*upon the earth distress of nations with perplexity. men's hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth*" (Luke 21. 25-26). It is to be especially noted that these plagues are pictured as coming upon evil institutions and evil men, not upon the good-living and the upright. It is the evil in the world, and not the world itself, that is to be destroyed. So it is "*his kingdom*", the kingdom of the beast, that is full of darkness and his followers who blaspheme God because of the plagues. And this paves the way for the sixth plague, one feature of which is Armageddon.

"And the sixth angel poured out his vial upon the great river Euphrates; and the water thereof was dried up, that the way of the kings of the east might be prepared" (Rev. 16. 12). This allusion goes back to the sixth century B.C. when the great city Babylon was taken by Darius and Cyrus the Median and Persian monarchs from the east, by the expedient of turning aside the waters of the Euphrates which flowed through the city, and marching in through the dried-up river bed. The story is recounted by Herodotus but Jeremiah foretold it half a century before it happened. (Jer. 51. 36). And Cyrus the Persian was foreseen by Isaiah as a symbol of the conquering Christ who would come with his forces at the time of the end to destroy the greater Babylon and establish a kingdom of righteousness (Isa. 45. 1). Ezekiel saw the glory of God advancing from the east in the same fashion (Ezek. 43. 2). Here then is shown in symbol the coming of Christ and his Church, the "*kings of the sunrising*", to assume the overlordship of earth. "*They lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years*" (Rev. 20. 4). This is the advance of the host of Heaven and the challenge is quickly taken up by the forces of earth; at this crucial moment John sees demonic spirits acting as the voice of the combined evil powers - the Devil and his agents on earth — gathering all who will join them "*to the battle of that great day of God Almighty. ..and they gathered them together into a place called in the Hebrew tongue Armageddon,*" (Rev. 16. 14-16). The A. V. renders "he gathered them" but "they" is correct in the Greek text. The demonic spirits do the gathering and the net result is that described in the 19th chapter: "*I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gathered together to make war against him that sat on the horse, and against his army*". This is the final confrontation between the King of Kings and his heavenly followers on the one hand and every earthly power and institution that supports or perpetrates evil on the other and the outcome is that these evil powers are destroyed.

Armageddon is the Greek form of the Hebrew "*Har-megiddo* - the mountain or peak of Megiddo. A Canaanite town of this name existed when Israel invaded the land and throughout Israel's occupancy of the land. The valley of Esdraelon, in which Megiddo was situated, was the scene of many battles between Egyptians, Hittites and Assyrians although Israel was rarely involved except in the case of King Josiah, who met his death there. The most likely basis of the allusion probably resides in the O.T. story of Barak's defeat of the Canaanites at this spot soon after Israel's entry into the land. Sisera the commander of the Canaanite hosts had held Israel in bondage for twenty years when Barak mustered a force of ten thousand men and charged down from Mount Tabor into the valley and put the Canaanites to undisciplined flight. The pursuit was continued until the last remnants of the hated enemy, overtaken not far from Megiddo, were put to the sword: "*...all the host of Sisera*

fell upon the edge of the sword; and there was not a man left" (Jud. 4.16). The magnitude of the victory was such that a hymn of praise to God was composed and the credit given to the powers of heaven. "Praise ye the Lord for the avenging of Israel. - they fought from heaven; the stars in their courses fought against Sisera ...So let all thine enemies perish, O Lord" (Jud. 5. 2-31). John the Revelator, looking for a fit simile to this last great conflict in which once again the powers of heaven engage in conflict with earth and gain the victory, could very reasonably have found it in this story of Barak's victory over Sisera so that when he pictured the opposing armies of the end time gathered into a place called Megiddo every one of his readers familiar with Old Testament history knew exactly what he meant, that once more the "stars in their courses" were fighting from heaven to put to flight the hosts of darkness.

The result of this conflict is the subject of the seventh and last plague; thunder, lightning, hail, earthquake, greater than men had ever previously experienced, and the utter ruin of *"the great city"*. Symbols like these were used by many of the Hebrew prophets when speaking of the last days. A vivid description is afforded by Isaiah's vision in chapter 34 of that book. The sword of the Lord is unleashed against all idolatry and all ungodliness and the land is likened in its resultant desolation to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah - it has become a waste howling wilderness inhabited only by predatory wild beasts and unclean birds. But not forever; the following chapter, Isa. 35, tells of the succeeding renovation: *"the wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad. ...and the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose. ...they shall see the glory of the Lord, and the excellency of our God"* (Isa. 35. 1-2). As with all the prophetic pictures of the End Time, judgment and blessing are associated and the one is always followed by the other. So it is with Armageddon. The overthrow of evil is followed by the *"new heavens and new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness"* of Peter's epistle (2 Pet. 3. 13) and in the Revelation visions this forms the theme of chapters 20-22, following directly upon the detailed description of the closing events of this Age which occupies 17-19.

Armageddon is not all darkness. There is light at its end. It is not all judgment; there is blessing also. Judgment on evil, yes, judgment that is inevitable because evil carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction. Blessing to follow, because that is the Divine plan; blessing even upon those who have been the servants of evil if so be that they turn from their evil ways, and join with those who will, in that blessed day, shout in joyous acclamation as did Isaiah of old, *Lo, this is our God. we have waited for him, and he will save us. This is the Lord; we have waited for him, we will be glad and rejoice in his salvation"*.

AOH

DAVID'S OLDER SONS

A tragedy

David had many sons. To have no son was a potential problem for a king, but so was having too many sons.

Some of them are well known, some less known. There was one who would become king after his father, and another two who wanted to be king, as well as a son that died as a baby. We may also note the way David behaved as a father and how he reacted to his sons. The scriptural account is to be found in 2 Samuel chapters 9-20, 1 Kings 1,2, and 1 Chronicles 3.1-9 and 14.3-7.

Six sons were born to David in Hebron (his first capital city): Amnon (mother Ahinoam); Daniel (mother Abigail); Absalom (mother Maacah); Adonijah (mother Haggith); Shephatiah (mother Abital); Ithream (mother Eglah). Born at Jerusalem were the four sons of Bathsheba - Shimea, Shobah, Nathan and Solomon - while other sons born in Jerusalem were Ithar, Elishama, Eliphet, Nogah, Nepheg, Japhia, Elishama, Eliada and Eliphelet. This is not counting the sons of his concubines. Another son, Jerimoth, is mentioned in 2 Chron. 11.18.

Of all these, Solomon is the best known, who succeeded his father as king over all the twelve tribes of Israel. He was the one given the wonderful opportunity to build the temple in Jerusalem to replace the tabernacle. He was the one famed for his wisdom (as mentioned in Matthew 12.42). He is also mentioned in relation to his glory in Matthew 6.28,29: "So why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these." On the other hand, Solomon's reign as king was imperfect. His foreign wives had their pagan gods, and he went on to build temples for them too. Despite setting out with the best of intentions, he did not live the long life he could have, and the problems were passed on to his children.

Amnon, which is supposed to mean 'faithful', was David's eldest son. His story is marred by sin. The main instance occurs in 2 Samuel 13, where he is attracted to his half-sister Tamar. He feigns illness, to ask for her to look after him. She goes to care for her supposed sick half-brother, and feeds him cakes while he is in bed. But he uses the occasion to force her into his bed, and to use a blunt word, he rapes her. Having used her so ill, he does not want to see her again and puts her out of the house and bolts the door on her. She flees to her brother Absalom's home.

Because of what Amnon did to his sister, Absalom hated him. This festered on for two years, as these things can, and at last Absalom found an

opportunity for revenge. He used sheep shearing festivities to take all the sons of David away for a feast. He got Amnon 'merry with wine' so that his servants could murder him.

King David mourned a long time for his son Amnon (2 Sam 13.37), despite his sin and what he did to his daughter. Why would he have mourned such a son? We can comfort ourselves with the thought that if David could mourn such a son, how much more can God in due time shower his mercy on many who are criminals when he brings them back in his kingdom.

Absalom, who in revenge had conspired to murder his half-brother, fled. No doubt fearing his father's reaction he went to the King of Geshur, and spent three years there. He had taken the life of another man - but what was the penalty for rape in the Bible? In some circumstances it meant the man could legally be killed, in other circumstances the offender would have to marry the young lady. So the law allowed for so severe a penalty, and we ought to bear this in mind when we consider that Absalom killed his brother.

In 2 Samuel 13.39 it says David was filled with longing for his son Absalom, he missed seeing him, longed to see him. Joab, the commander, perceived David's wishes, and arranged for a woman to come and put a test case that was very similar to the situation with Absalom, and in this way brought David's mind around to allowing himself to see his son. So Absalom returned to Jerusalem on his father's orders, but he was not allowed to see King David or live in the palace.

Absalom still wanted to actually see his father, and asked Joab for help. Joab refused to see him, evidently he felt he had done enough. Absalom overreacted, and set on fire Joab's field. He asked Joab to visit David and ask him, if he, Absalom, was guilty, to kill him, but otherwise to let him meet his father. Absalom came before King David and bowed before him with his face to the ground, and David gave his son Absalom his kiss.

The bond between father and son was renewed, but Absalom wanted power, and to succeed his father as king. For four years he intercepted everyone coming for a judgment from King David, saying there was no one to hear their case at the palace, but the law was on their side. This way he made himself popular with the Israelites. After asking permission to go and worship at Hebron, he led a conspiracy to overthrow his father as king. David is forced to leave his palace as the plotters gain in number. They are gathered to battle, and David still asks that Absalom go unharmed. It was a bad day, twenty thousand were killed, and Absalom got caught by the neck in a tree when on his mule. Finding him, many declined to end Absalom's life, but Joab does not decline to kill him. As all through history, whoever rebels against a king and battles against him and loses, can lose his life as a consequence.

Naturally they fear to tell David, but they manage to indicate that Absalom is dead, as are many other of his enemies. David understands, and cries, and says "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom. Would God I had died for thee, O Absalom my son, my son."

After the other two sons/princes were dead, Adonijah was the eldest surviving son. We are told he was handsome, but more relevantly that David had never reprimanded him about anything. We are also told that Adonijah was ambitious. It indicates a faulty level of indulgence from David. You may surmise that he was spoilt and not given boundaries. A younger child is often afforded more freedom, but in this case it is implied that David did not do his job as a father properly. All this led to a big issue.

A stage came when David was old and likely to die. We already know that Adonijah was ambitious and wanted to claim the throne for his own. He got Joab and Abiathar the priest to support him, but he did not secure the backing of Nathan the prophet, or Zadok the priest, or three other key officials. He organised for many officials and all the other sons of David (apart from Solomon) to make a sacrifice of sheep and calves, and have a sacrificial feast. This act was intended to proclaim him as the heir apparent to David's throne. God had otherwise planned to have Solomon succeed - as often happens in scripture the younger would have precedence over the older.

Adonijah's strategy fails as Nathan and Bathsheba act, and David proclaims Solomon as his successor. Solomon enters Jerusalem riding on his father's mule, and is anointed king by Zadok and Nathan. The trumpet was blown and the shout was raised, 'Long live King Solomon!' Adonijah was then afraid, but Solomon said he would not be harmed if he remained loyal. Adonijah bows low before Solomon.

After David's death it appears Adonijah was still struggling to accept the situation. He asked his mother to speak to Solomon's mother about Adonijah taking for his wife David's last favourite, a beautiful young woman called Abishag who cared for David during his last months. Solomon saw what this implied. 'You might as well give him my throne too.' Joab and Abiathar were on his side. Solomon had to have Adonijah executed.

Too many sons, not properly trained and disciplined, can cause a problem.

What do we make of these prominent sons? They did not humbly look to God, as David did. Looking for power in this life was more important to them than accepting what God has decided is best. "*Not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble are called*" (1 Cor.1.26) How hard it is for prominent men. Too much preference leads to its own specific issues. They are in the same category as the governors in this world whom God has not called and chosen to be kings and priests. But nevertheless, as

David still mourned for them, God also mourns, and is not forgetful of them. Neither has He forgotten those other sons that we know only by name, or not at all. God's mercy is a wonderful thing.

"I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion" (Rom.9.15).

NAC

SOLOMON AS A TYPE OF CHRIST

Dictionary: *Type* (theology) *That by which something is prefigured; a prophetic similitude.*

In spite of his shortcomings, King Solomon is often labeled as a type of Christ.

a. **Peace** David fought many battles, Solomon did not. His reign was noted for the lack of warfare during his reign (1 Kings 4.24,25) *For he had dominion over all the region on this side the river, from Tiphseh even to Azkar, over all the kings on this side the river: and he had peace on all sides round about him. And Judah and Israel dwelt safely, every man under his vine and under his fig tree, from Dan even to Beersheba, all the days of Solomon.*

Isa.9.6,7 *For unto us a child is born.. and he shall be called... the Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this.* We know our Lord Jesus is seen in this scripture.

b. **David's Line** Christ, the anointed, had to come from the line of David. (Isaiah 11.1-3) *And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots. And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord; and shall make him of quick understanding in the fear of the Lord: and he shall not judge after the sight of his eyes and after the hearing of his ears.....*

This easily corresponds with Solomon who was the natural son of

David.

c. **Wisdom** Solomon had asked for wisdom in 1 Kings 3, rather than riches, long life, or the death of his enemies. He demonstrated wisdom, for example in judging who was the mother of the child that died in the night (vv.16-28). *The queen of the south... came from the uttermost parts of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon* (Matthew 12.42)

Jesus continued '*behold, a greater than Solomon is here*'. Jesus was known to speak with authority. He had perfect knowledge of God's commandments, and always, always had an excellent answer. It must have galled the Pharisees that he was always able to do this when they could not. Even at age 12 (Luke 2.47) '*all that heard him were astonished at his understanding and answers*'. Think also of the Isaiah 11 prophecy above.

d. **Servant** 1 Kings 3.7,8 Solomon describes himself as '*thy servant*' - king instead of David his father, in the midst of a great people. Solomon seems to have had the right attitude to his role as king, it was to serve rather than to dictate. Dictators in recent history seem to have done limited amounts of good, and getting them to end their period of control has many times been bloody for those involved. We only have to view the recent events in Libya to see where it can end.

Jesus said, '*whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave, just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many*' (Matthew 20.26-28 NIV).

NAC

A SON IS GIVEN

"For unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder." (Isa. 9. 6).

Long centuries before Jesus was born, and Christmas became a Christian festival, the peoples of Bible lands -- Assyria, Babylonia, Canaan — made the end of December a time of celebration and rejoicing. It marked the change of shortening days and the turning of the sun to climb higher in the heavens; it gave promise of ripening crops and the joys of harvest. The ancient Babylonians used to drag their Yule logs into their homes on what corresponds to our Christmas Eve and consume them by fire; the following morning they decked with gifts the Tree of Life which they pretended in symbol had grown from the ashes of the dead log - the prototype of our "Christmas tree" - thus,

said they, would life come out of death, in due time, by the favour of the gods.

Where did they get the tradition from, tradition so strangely true to fact? Was there some lingering memory of the true faith once held and taught by their common father Noah, their racial ancestors Shem, Ham and Japheth, the patriarchs of their families like Peleg and Heber? It would almost seem so! For it is true that out of the ashes of death will come new life; that after the destruction of the dead wood of this world there will arise a Tree of Life whose fruit shall be for food to mankind and whose leaves shall be for the healing of the nations, rich gifts indeed for the sons of men, in that greatest of all Christmas festivals when the Kingdom of light and life has succeeded upon the ending of this world of darkness and death.

Isaiah had something of this in mind when he saw the vision of the Great Light. Like so many of the prophets' revelations, he viewed this representation of things to come against the background of his own day. There is a temptation to read the thrilling passage "*Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given,*" as though it were a completely disjointed piece of revelation sandwiched unthinkingly into a passage dealing with the local troubles of Israel in the prophet's own day having nothing to do with the subject of the Kingdom. That is not so; chapters 7 to 12 of Isaiah's prophecy comprise one complete and harmonious presentation of Millennial truth in which the vision of the Everlasting Father finds its proper place. And in order to understand the full harmony that exists between these wonderful chapters we must endeavour to put ourselves in the prophet's place and look at them through his eyes.

The story starts with Isaiah's seventh chapter. Rezin, k

King of Syria, and Pekah, King of Israel the "ten-tribe" kingdom, have joined together to attack Judah, the "two-tribe" kingdom of which Ahaz was the apostate king. They have besieged Jerusalem, but the Lord has not yet suffered them to take it. The people of Judah are nevertheless greatly afraid, for they have long since abandoned their faith in God and they know not where to turn for help.

This is Isaiah's opportunity. At the bidding of the Lord he goes forth to meet Ahaz and give him an assurance that the Lord is going to defend Jerusalem—for his own Name's sake; certainly not on account of any piety or faith on the part of the wicked king. But Ahaz does not believe; he does not want to believe. "*If ye will not believe,*" says Isaiah, "*surely ye shall not be established*". Therefore a second word came to Ahaz. "*Ask thee a sign of the Lord thy God.*" commands Isaiah. But Ahaz said, "*I will not ask, neither will I prove the Lord*". His rebellion is deliberate and calculated; it cannot be excused. Therefore the message of condemnation, already given to the ten-tribe kingdom. A young woman shall bear a son, and call his name Immanuel. That son is the sign; before that child has grown to youthful maturity, Assyria

shall have desolated Samaria and ravaged Judah. Ten-tribes, and some from among the two-tribes, shall have gone into captivity for their sins. The seventh and eighth chapters trace the sad history of that terrible time of the invading Assyrian hosts; the people, said Isaiah, would finally look unto the earth, "*and behold trouble and darkness, dimness and anguish, and they shall be driven to darkness*".

Now these were not just empty words, spoken by the prophet after the manner of a gramophone record. Isaiah, inspired as he was by the Holy Spirit, was *seeing* these things, future though they were, and he described what he saw. His prophetic vision showed him the grim Assyrian warriors marching through the land, and fleeing multitudes pressing on brokenly before them. He saw the deeds of violence, the slaughter of helpless captives, the brutal treatment of women and children, the burning villages, the desolated vineyards and pastures, the clear Judean skies clouded and darkened by drifting smoke. As he gazed upon that dread scene his prophetic vision sharpened, and in the spirit of his mind he was carried over nigh on three thousand years of time, to see the events which this Syrian invasion in the days of Ahaz and Hezekiah pictured. He saw the last great onslaught of the forces of darkness, the hosts which we call the armies of Gog and Magog, descending upon God's ancient people at the end of this age. Isaiah still beheld Assyrian soldiers, he still identified the people and the villages and the scenery of the land he knew, but with that mysterious certainty that is sometimes our own experience in dreams he knew that he was looking now at a scene representing the end of this Age and the time of the greatest deliverance of all; and as he looked, straining to see into the murky blackness which all but shrouded the vagueness of the moving figures, men, women and children writhing under the terror that had come upon them, he saw something else, something which caused him to look up and break into the tremendous declaration that commences at verse 2 of chapter 9.

"The people that walked in darkness, " he cried in exultation, "have seen a great light; they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined."

Away there on the horizon, beyond the tops of the eastern mountains, above the darkness of the present terror, the glorious radiance of coming day was racing up the sky. The time of light, the time of life - was come, and the darkness would soon be overpast. The Lord was coming as it were from Teman, and the Holy One from Mount Paran, his glory covering the heavens, and his brightness as the light of day, as the sun. Isaiah saw the Assyrian soldiers cower and flee before that terrible radiance, the arrows of Heaven's artillery raining upon them, and all their armies put to flight. The Lord had risen up to the defence and deliverance of his people, and from behind the hills

there came into sight the rising of the Sun of righteousness, with healing in his wings. And the people, so lately bound in the darkness and in the shadow of death, rejoiced in this great appearance which had delivered them from the kingdom of darkness and brought them forth into the kingdom of light. That is what Isaiah saw, and for the moment all thought of his countrymen's present troubles and dangers was forgotten, the while his eyes drank in their fill of those resplendent glories symbolising earth's Millennial day.

This is the Christmas vision indeed, the turning of the old, darksome, dying year into the new, lightening, living age of light and life for all men. Here is at hand the time of promise and of gifts unto men, the prospect of harvest and all the joys that come with harvest, the toil of ploughing and harrowing but a memory. Here in very truth is the day for which Isaiah so long had looked, and concerning which he was yet to preach and teach persistently and consistently through many dark years. But for the present the vision was leading him onward into a glory of revelation.

"Thou hast multiplied the nation; thou hast increased the joy." So the Margolis version has it, and Rotherham confirms with *"Thou hast increased the exultation; thou hast made great the joy."* (The "not" in verse 3 of the A. V. is an incorrect rendering). *"They joy before thee according to the joy in harvest, and as men rejoice when they divide the spoil."* Here is a picture of mankind, freed at last from the fear of evil things and evil men, from death and all that death implies, "multiplied" upon the fair Millennial earth, destined to be the home of resurrected hosts. Isaiah sees here the beginning of the Millennial kingdom; perhaps he saw, or thought he saw, the promised multiplication of his own nation, Abraham's seed, "as the sands by the seashore" but it is just as correct to apply his prophetic outburst to the greater increase of all men, the entire human family, in that day. He had just seen the great light burst upon a world of evil and put the darkness to flight; now he sees the consequent increase of men and the increase of their joy. *"It shall be said in that day, Lo, this is our God. We have waited for him, and he will save us. This is the Lord; we have waited for him. We will be glad and rejoice in his salvation."*

Why do they thus rejoice? The next verse supplies the answer. *"For thou hast broken the yoke of his burden, and the stall of his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, as in the day of Midian."* The rout of the Midianites in the days of Gideon was one of Israel's greatest victories. The brave three hundred, having nothing but *lights* concealed in earthen pitchers, by that means and that alone defeated the enemy host. Did the Holy Spirit suggest that defeat of Midian to Isaiah with set intent? Is it not true that this coming greater defeat of the powers of greater evil at the end of this Age is going to be because another "three hundred" will have had their inner light revealed by the breaking of their earthen pitchers? *"Then shall the righteous shine forth as the*

sun in the kingdom of their Father!" (Matt. 13. 43).

"For every boot stamped with fierceness, and every cloak rolled in blood, shall even be for burning, for fuel of fire." Thus runs the Margolis rendering, and other translators agree with the thought, not easily discernible in the Authorised Version, that the rejoicing is on account of the implements of warfare, the armour and clothing of the soldiery, and the grim relics of war, being all consumed in the fire. *"He maketh wars to cease unto the ends of the earth."* War is no more; the time of peace has come, and the devouring fire has consumed all the institutions of unrighteousness.

"For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder." Was it that Isaiah heard, eight hundred years before it floated over Judea's quiet fields, the angels' song of Bethlehem? Did the Holy Spirit in some wonderful manner convey to his attentive mind those strains that later fell upon the ears of the shepherds? It reads almost like a song. *"Unto us a child is born. ...unto us a son is given. .."* Mysterious, sweet cadences, rising and falling on the calmness that has succeeded the vision of slaughter. *"Unto us a child is born. ..a child is born!"* That surely must be the fulfilment of Divine promise, the birth of earth's new King, come to rule in righteousness. *"Unto us a son is given!"* The truest son of Israel that Israel would ever know, a prophet like unto Moses, a king like unto David, a priest like unto Melchisedek; yes, a priest upon his throne. *"A child is born! ...a son is given!"* So the music must have gone on as Isaiah listened. *"Unto you is born this day in the City of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. ..Unto us a child is born. ..a son is given. ..and the government shall be upon his shoulder!"*

The heavenly song fades away- perhaps the vision passes from his sight also, but the inspiration of the Spirit is strong upon Isaiah and he opens his mouth, only partially comprehending the significance of his words, yet knowing that they have to do with that coming Day for which he looks.

"His name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor". The comma ought not to be there. The expression is a combined one. The word for "wonderful" possesses the meaning of exceptionally singular or unique, something as it were beyond the understanding of mere man. When Manoah asked his celestial guest his name, and the angel told him it was 'secret' the same word is used (Jud. 13 18). The word 'counsellor' is one that is used of royalty's closest confidants and advisers (as King David's counsellor in 2 Sam. 13. 12). Our coming King is, then, in the first place, the Wonderful Counsellor. Of whom is He the confidant? Surely of his Father and our Father, who will do nothing without revealing his purposes to the beloved Son in whom his plans are centred and by whom they are executed. In the visions of Revelation one like unto a slain Lamb takes the sealed book from the hand of the Deity upon the Throne and reveals what is therein written. We do not know, we cannot

visualise, the intimacy of fellowship and oneness of understanding that must exist between the Father and the Son, giving such depth of meaning to Jesus' own words, during his earthly life, "I and my Father are one". Surely He indeed is the One who *"was by him, as one brought up with him; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him"* (Prov. 8. 30). Yea, indeed, his name is "Wonderful Counsellor".

But it is also *"the Mighty God"*. Not *El Elyon* - "The Most High". Not *"El Shaddai"* - the Almighty". Not *"Jehovah"* - "The Eternal One". The Hebrew is *"Gibbor El"*. *Gibbor* is the word for giantlike, powerful, mighty, and the giants and mighty men of the Old Testament are *"gibborim"* (the plural form of *gibbor*). But *El* itself means "mighty one". The plural form, *elohim*, refers to God himself or to the heathen gods, or to angelic or supernatural beings, or even to mighty men, as in Psa. 82. 6 (*"I have said, ye are gods, and all of you are children of the most High)* so this name "the mighty God" really means "the mightiest mighty one". Is not that a fitting name for the One to whom is committed all power in heaven and earth? Is not that a fitting name for the One to whom every knee in heaven as well as on earth, is to bow, and every tongue, angelic and earthly, confess? *"I am he that liveth, and was dead; and behold, I am alive for evermore; and have the keys of hell and of death."* There is a wonderful passage in the Apocryphal *"Gospel of Nicodemus"* in which the risen Lord is pictured as storming the gates of hell and rescuing its hopeless inhabitants. *"When the prince of hell heard"* (that Jesus was coming) *"he said"* (to Satan) *"I adjure thee by the powers which belong to thee and me that thou bring him not to me. For when I heard of the power of his word, I trembled for fear, and all my impious company were disturbed. ... And while Satan and the prince of hell were discoursing thus to each other, on a sudden there was a voice as of thunder and the rushing of winds, saying. ...Lift up your gates, O ye princes: and be ye lifted up, ye gates of hell, and the King of Glory will enter in ...And the mighty Lord appeared in the form of a man, and enlightened those places which had ever before been in darkness; and broke asunder the fetters which before could not be broken; and with his invincible power visited those who sat in the deep darkness by iniquity, and the shadow of death by sin."* This is assuredly our our Mighty One, to whom has been given all power in heaven and in earth, and will exercise that power to overcome death and all evil and establish the reign of everlasting righteousness.

What then of his third title - *Everlasting Father*? Does He here usurp the prerogative of the One upon the Throne of Creation, the God and Father of us all? We know at the outset that such a thing can never be. At the close of the Millennial Age, when Christ the King will have subdued evil and vanquished death, when He shall have put down all rule and all authority and all power

that opposes his benevolent and life-giving sway (1 Cor. 15.24), when mankind are, at long length, reconciled to God, and in full perfection of life have entered upon their eternal inheritance, *"then shall the Son also himself be subject unto him that put all things under him, that God may be all in all."* (1 Cor. 15. 28). The thought in this title is that given by Rotherham; the *"Father of Futurity"* or the Father of the Coming Age. It is Jesus who has redeemed and purchased the entire human race by means of his own death on the cross; it is Jesus who receives them back to life in the Millennial Age soon to begin, and becomes their Mediator, the mediator between God and man during the remaining period of man's insufficiency. It is Jesus who gives them life; who by means of his priestly and kingly work will so influence the hearts and minds of men that all in whom is any possibility of reclamation will eventually repent and be converted, and come to Jesus, the Lord of Life, that they might have life. He will be the world's great Life-giver, the world's Father, during that Age and the life that men will receive they will receive at his hands. As it is in Adam that men die, so it is in Christ that men will be made alive. (1 Cor. 15.22).

In so many ways He will be a father to redeemed humanity. *He shall feed his flock like a shepherd*" sings Isaiah *"and gently lead those that are with young."* There will be such infinite patience and understanding in that day. No longer will there be the hard, unyielding iron of the law, demanding its "pound of flesh", its demands against the sinners. There will be instead the wise, loving albeit firm discipline of the understanding parent, and a growing up into maturity, "whosoever will", under that paternal rule. The wilful sinner, if he will not repent, must remain a sinner still, but at the end he finds himself shut out of the Holy City, for he has rejected life, and without life he cannot enter (Rev. 21. 27). But he that overcometh will be presented at the end before the Father Himself and experience the glorious liberty of the Sons of God.

The Prince of Peace! There is no mistaking the meaning of that name! It brings to the mind at once all that is fondest in the dreams of men, in the hopes and beliefs of those who today are the Lord's disciples. "Peace on earth; goodwill to men." So many have given up hope that it will come; but we know differently. *"In his days shall the righteous flourish, and abundance of peace so long as the moon endureth. He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth. (Psa. 72. 7-8). "Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other. Truth shall spring out of the earth; and righteousness shall look down from heaven." (Psa. 85. 10-11). "And the work of righteousness shall be peace; and the effect of righteousness quietness and assurance for ever". (Isa. 32. 17).*

Not only is He the prince of that peace which is to be man's inward possession, peace of heart, of mind, of soul, that peace with God which is the result of justification in his sight ("Therefore being justified by faith, we have

peace with God") (Rom. 5. 1), that peace which comes with the realisation of human perfection and possession of everlasting life. He is also the Prince of that outward peace which will be characteristic of human society in that blessed day. The same passage in Isa. 32 tells of that. "My people shall dwell in a *peaceable* habitation, and in *sure* dwellings, and in *quiet* resting-places" (vs. 18). What a contrast to this present day of distress and trouble, strife and tumult! "*They shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree; and none shall make them afraid.*" (Micah 4. 4). In every picture of the future day that we have, this thought of peace is prominent and predominant. "*I will extend peace to her like a river, and the glory of the nations like a flowing stream.*"

This is our King! This is earth's King, disesteemed as yet by those who will, one day, many of them and most of them, become his devoted and adoring subjects. "*Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever.*"

AOH

THE DIVINE WILL IN LITTLE THINGS

"Take us the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vines, for our vines have tender grapes" (Cant. 2.15).

Jackals, they were, abundant in Israel in those days - the AV translators were rather weak in their Natural History. Packs of little jackals, nibbling voraciously at the stems of the vines, inhibiting their growth so that the fruit withered and died. The Hebrew word for "spoil" means to corrupt to destruction. Fitting simile for the little things of daily life which can lead astray unless regulated by our knowledge of the Divine Will.

But how to discern that Will? In the bigger things of life the way is usually fairly clear; the dividing line between what is right and what is wrong in the Lord's sight is so plainly stated in the Word, so evident in the light of our knowledge of the Divine principles, that there is little doubt. We choose either the right way or the wrong way, knowing what we do, and abide by the outcome. But in these little things, so apparently trivial, so everyday in their occurrence, so seemingly unimportant, does it really matter so much? Is the Lord really so concerned? Will it really have so much effect on our Christian lives?

It is then that we have to remember the little foxes.

Just a little nibble at the stem, and the fruit withers.

It is related of William Penn, the celebrated colleague of the Quaker leader George Fox, and later on founder of the American State of Pennsylvania, that shortly after his conversion he had such a problem. William Penn was a highly placed member of society, a nobleman in the 16th century Court of King James of England. As such, and in common with his equals, he was expected to wear his sword at all times when in public; to appear at Court, as he was frequently required to do, without it, would be taken as an insult to His Majesty. In the past carefree days that presented no problem, but now that he was a Christian, and a Quaker to boot, well, that was different. What would the Lord have him do? So he came to George Fox with his problem.

The Quaker leader surveyed him dispassionately. "Wear it as long as thou canst, friend William" he said.

At their next meeting Fox looked at his friend. "Where is thy sword, friend William"? He enquired.

The answer came equally seriously. "I took thy advice, friend George. I wore it as long as I could".

There, perhaps, lies the answer. Our Lord is not so demanding that we in our insufficiency must make the right decision in this field in every little problem and facet of life, as that we think about it and decide for ourselves what would be the right thing to do. If we have made the wrong choice in all sincerity, He can easily put it right - or perhaps leave it to the outcome so that we can learn the lesson for ourselves. Pupils in the school of Christ do not always get their sums right first time, but so far as the Teacher is concerned the important thing is that they pass the examination at the year's end. In the meantime, *"he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust"* (Psa. 103.14).

St. Paul had a healthy outlook on questions of this nature. In his day one of the minor problems was the propriety in the Lord's sight of eating food, usually meat, which had previously functioned as an offering on the altars of the pagan gods of Rome. Such food was afterwards sold in the public markets (1 Cor. 10.25), and formed a major part of the daily food of the poor - and many of the early Christians were poor. Said Paul *"I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself - but to him that esteemeth anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean"* (Rom. 14.14).

The Lord places more importance upon the sincere endeavour of the Christian to form a right judgment than upon the rightness of the decision. Should he or should he not devote a measure of time to the pursuit of good music which might otherwise be given to the study of the Scriptures? The Lord loves good music; he spoke of little children playing their pipes, and anyway there are harps and trumpets, or their celestial counterparts, in

Heaven. Or should I participate (judiciously) in a social festivity? One of the first things our Lord did after his baptism was to attend a wedding; not only so, when the wine ran out He provided some more. Is it a case of personal adornment? The first clothes any human being ever wore were fabricated by the hand of God in the Garden. It is for us to use all things gratefully, moderately, wisely, to his glory. *“Whatsoever ye do, in word or in deed, do all to the glory of God.”*

FEW WORDS

There was a time when books, and especially religious books, were thick with pages and crammed full of words. It is not so today, when words are explained by pictures and diagrams, and videos, DVDs, powerpoint presentations, and everything a computer can do, largely take the place of books. Yet words, even if not printed, are still the key to understanding what is being put forward, there are simply not so many of them, and they are not the only source of knowledge. We are not expected to pore over close printed pages, yet the few words we use need more than ever to be meaningful.

Few words in speaking to God

Ecclesiastes 5.2 reads ‘God is in heaven and thou upon earth. Therefore let your words be few.’ This advice is in the context of worship at the Jewish temple. First, we are advised that it is better to listen to God and his law than to have a lot to say for ourselves. We need to be circumspect in what we promise God. What we vow, we must perform. We must beware speaking ‘empty’ words, not just words that are simply mumbo-jumbo, nor even meaningful promises that we do not really intend to keep. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the Living God.

Yet Jesus taught us that it is as to our Father that we may come near to God. Even in this relationship, the child does not need to use a lot of words. In fact, many a human parent is frankly unimpressed at being repeatedly pestered by an importunate child. We are told that our Father knows what we need before we ask, it is not that He needs telling what we need, it is simply our need to tell Him all about it.

When Jesus taught his disciples how to pray, the model he gave was concise. The Lord’s Prayer first gives due recognition to God and who He is, in worship. Second, it accepts and acknowledges his good plan, and our part in obedience to it. Thirdly, it turns to basic needs that we all have: for daily food that we need in order to live and grow (and food is not only for the body,

but for the mind, the heart, the soul); forgiveness (and we need to show the spirit of forgiveness); and the need for protection from sin in ourselves and the evil around us. Matthew 6.32 states that He knows our needs for food and clothing - what we should be seeking first is His kingdom and His righteousness.

Not that we should be inhibited in our prayers. Jesus spoke positively (Luke 11.9-13) that we should ask, seek, knock, with confidence. Especially for the gift of his Holy Spirit. And the example that Jesus gave of prayer was of spending whole nights in communion with his Father. How many words did he need to use on those frequent solitary nights, seeking guidance and encouragement? His prayer in John 17, spoken aloud in the presence of his disciples, had its special purpose for their benefit; by Gethsemane He was back to private communication with the Father, not many words, but such words!

Few words in speaking to people

Proverbs 10.19 states that where there are many words, transgression is not lacking. The more we say, the more we reveal of our hidden sinful thoughts. Says James (chapter 3) that if we can control our tongue, we can control our whole selves. Words are disproportionate in their power, like a rudder steering a ship or a spark setting off a forest fire. And the words we speak are themselves difficult to keep under control, easier to tame a tiger than to tame the tongue! So is it better not to say anything at all? James goes on to speak of wisdom, and showing in our lives the meekness of wisdom. To do this, we need words, wise words, enough of them, but not so many that our attempted 'wisdom' becomes counter-productive. It is one's course in life that gives weight to the words. The wisdom that is from above is '...pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, without uncertainty or insincerity...'

A few words of scripture can be powerful in the life. A Christian writer had just quoted Psalm 4.4 'in your anger do not sin; when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent' (NIV). Then she was seriously let down by a friend. It was a test. She had also written, 'Before you speak, let the word speak to you.' It is out of the heart that the mouth speaks, and she needed to cleanse her heart. The inside cracks, crevices and guilty corners of our lives will affect what we say. We need not a scrubbing brush, but the clean, fresh, good wind of the Spirit to blow through us, and to experience the power of a new birth.

Words in witness

When the apostle Paul was a prisoner, King Agrippa said to him, 'In

short, you are trying to make a Christian of me.’ Agrippa, in his thirties, had been called in by the Roman governor because of his knowledge of Jewish affairs. Paul (Acts 26) had been explaining how he had come to be in prison because of his belief in Jesus Christ, and his mission to the heathen. He had gone about it methodically. He explained the context, and how when Jesus rose from the dead it was a fulfilment of Jewish national hopes, of what the prophets had said. Then he gave his personal experience, what had happened on the way to Damascus and how it had affected his life. Then he applied this to his listener, and challenged him to believe the prophets. It was not a short speech, but it was to the point. Agrippa summed up what Paul was trying to do, ‘In short, you are trying to make a Christian of me.’ Paul’s answer, ‘The long and the short of it is that I wish that you and everybody here were a believer like me’ - like Paul, except for the manacles he was wearing.

When we speak of our faith to others, let our words be the ones that really matter. A word fitly spoken (Proverbs 25.11), to use a comparison from jewelry, is like apples of gold in a silver setting. ‘Fitly spoken’ means that our words will be to the point, and avoiding ‘religious speak’ be such that the listener can easily understand.

There are many brief phrases that we may think of which measure up to this standard. When we speak, we need to think of the person we are talking to, first, and then of our words. We might sometimes have reason to say, ‘God does care for us’; or, ‘God’s kingdom will definitely come’ (even if we are not sure when). Our few words may even be unexpected, but are they addressed to the point of need? A speaker at an international Christian conference once said, ‘There are three important phrases to learn in any language: “I love you”: “I forgive you”: and, “Supper’s ready”.

Food for thought?

GC

God holds the key of all unknown, and I am glad. If other hands should hold the key, or if He trusted it to me, I might be sad. What if tomorrow’s cares were here without its rest! I’d rather He unlocked the day, and, as the hours swing open, say ‘My will is best’. The very dimness of my sight makes me secure, for, groping in my misty way, I feel His hand—I hear Him say ‘My help is sure’.

I cannot read His future plans, but this I know: I have the smiling of His face, and all the refuge of His grace, while here below.

Enough! This covers all my wants, and so I rest. For what I cannot, He can see, and in His care I safe shall be. For ever blest.

J.Parker

For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. 1 Cor.13.12

BIBLE PEOPLE - A QUIZ

How well do you know about people named in the Bible? Here is an opportunity to test your knowledge. Maximum score 100.

For each person named, say

whether Old Testament or New Testament (1 point)

in which book of the Bible is the person named (1 point)

which chapter in the book (1 point)

one fact about the person (1 point)

You might wish to do the quiz on your own, just to test yourself - or to do the quiz with a friend, or a group - or at a family gathering over the festive period - or even to make it a competition?

- 1 JAIRUS
- 2 BARABBAS
- 3 NAAMAN
- 4 PHILEMON
- 5 ZACCHAEUS
- 6 ABEDNEGO
- 7 CORNELIUS
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A TASTE OF 'THE MESSIAH'

I have been enjoying listening to some '*Messiah Christmas Highlights*'. It is music on a CD (I have at last entered the 21st century!), chosen to be a topical selection that can be played at the time when Christ's birth is traditionally remembered. The pieces all come from Handel's '*Messiah*', an oratorio written in 1741 and still frequently performed today, especially at Christmas and Easter.

Messiah is a Hebrew word meaning 'anointed one'. "The idea of anointing a person for a special mission is applied to kings and priests (Leviticus 4.3), prophets (1 Kings 19.16), patriarchs (Psalm 105.7-15) and even of a heathen king, Cyrus (Isaiah 45.1)... this use of anointing to indicate a specific office.... became applied to the one who would be God's chosen instrument in the deliverance of his people.... The hope of the coming Messiah took many different forms, but the predominant one was the idea of the Davidic king who would establish an earthly kingdom for the people of Israel and would banish Israel's enemies.... a political agent, but with a religious bias." (Guthrie) The coming Messianic age offered bright prospects to the people of God (Isaiah 26-29, 40ff Ezekiel 40-48 Daniel 12 Joel 2.28-3.21). "But the origin and character of the coming Messiah was not clearly understood." King Herod ascertained that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, John the Baptist and Jesus himself were asked if they were the Messiah. Jesus at his trial was accused of being 'Messiah, a king' (Luke 23.2). But Jesus saw his mission of redemption as redeeming the hearts of the people, not acting as a nationalist.

The Greek word for *Messiah* is *Christ*. "Jesus Christ" means "Jesus the Messiah".

George Frederic Handel when he composed his work '*The Messiah*', was setting to music scriptural texts which had been chosen by Charles Jennens. Jennens was a rich and cultured man, a friend and collaborator with Handel, who had a new home in Leicestershire, Gopsall Hall, where Handel worked when he was composing this work. Jennens believed in the authority of the Bible and he accepted the fact of God's intervention in human affairs, which many educated people at that time did not. His selection of scriptures began with God's promises as spoken by the prophets and ended with Christ's glorification in heaven. The work was not a history set to music, but assumed knowledge of the story, and chose words which pointed out the significance of each stage. Since it consisted completely of words of scripture, the words could be 'incomprehensible to those ignorant of the biblical accounts' (Burns).

But to those who knew the story, Handel's music brought out the joy and the excitement.

Because of this joy and excitement I have greatly enjoyed listening to the 'Messiah Christmas Highlights'. It is a choice of items mostly from the first part of 'The Messiah', which necessarily misses out some sections which are important from a theological perspective, but consists of what is thought to sound specially good musically. Even so, it provides a lot to think about.

Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned. (Is.40.1,2)

Cheer up! cheer up! is what we might say today. This is not to make light of what is being said, for it is God speaking to his special people. They are in trouble, in captivity. So far as He is concerned, they are forgiven. The people of Israel had been at the mercy of the Great Powers, Egypt and Assyria, for many years, and they finished up as captives in Babylon. If this is God's punishment, the consequence of their sins, they have served their time.

It is the same for all of us in trouble who look to God, He is on our side. What He will do may not at this point be revealed. The important thing is, He forgives our sins and wishes us well.

Look at a modern translation and see that this verse is not just a statement about God's love, but the prophet is being given a job to do.

"Comfort my people" says our God. "Comfort them! Encourage the people of Jerusalem. Tell them they have suffered long enough and their sins are now forgiven."

The voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare ye the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. (Is.40.3)

These are the words that John the Baptist quoted hundreds of years later, when people asked him who he was. His task was to prepare the way for Jesus. He knew that if they were to be receivers of God's love and forgiveness, they must get themselves in a fit state to receive it.

We can understand here the picture of work being done in the desert to make a road fit for a king, who would come and help them. For us, now, it is a way for God to come, into our hearts.

A voice cries out, "Prepare in the wilderness a road for the Lord. Make the road straight and smooth, a highway fit for our God."

Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill made low, the crooked straight and the rough places plain. (Is.40.4)

This part of Isaiah's message is full of excitement and urgency, a spirit which

fills chapter 40 and the ensuing chapters. Someone constructing a modern motorway would recognise the picture - to take the top off hills, fill the valleys, perhaps build a few bridges, make a roadway suitable to modern transport. Just as there were obstacles for the traffic to be removed, so there can be internal blockages in our lives. John the Baptist's message was for people to repent.

Earlier, restoring the Israelites from captivity involved preparation on their part, making ready to go home. Restoring our lives does not just happen without effort. Restoring the world is what the Messiah would come to do - and has the world up to now ever been ready for it?

Fill the valleys, level off the hills. Smooth out the ruts, clear out the rocks.

And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it. (Is.40.5)

What did Isaiah mean by 'the glory of the Lord'? Was he looking back through 500 years of Jewish history to when the pillar of fire led the Israelites through the wilderness? Did he have a vision like Ezekiel of a majestic being sweeping in on the new highway to come to his captive people? - or to go as a beacon before them, as he led the throng back to their old home?

Or is 'the glory of the Lord' something more inward to us, softer but empowering? After listening to this music one morning I went out into the early dawn. There was a freshness in the air, a glinting dew on the grass, and a soft light in the sky which grew in brightness until the sun burst out over the treetops and there was the glory of the morning for all the world to share. God's people, whoever they have been, have always desired all the world to see God's glory, shining in upon their lives and shining out for the good of the world. But did Isaiah realise how many hundred years of history would pass before the Messiah appeared?

Then God's bright glory will shine and everyone will see it. Yes. Just as God has said.

When Jennens selected the texts for Handel, the ones he chose next sounded a note of warning. He went to Haggai and Malachi - a shaking of all nations - and then, who can stand up when Messiah appears, for he is like a furnace which refines metal. This is the theme which the next selection takes up.

And he shall purify the sons of Levi that they may offer to the Lord an offering in righteousness. (Mal.3.3)

When Malachi prophesied there were still 400 years to pass before Messiah appeared. What Malachi looked at was his own people at the time - God's people! - and their obvious unsatisfactory ideas and habits. He brought his

focus on to the Levites, a tribe chosen specially to serve God among the chosen people. They had become slack. What could you say to men who went along with evil magic, adultery, lying under oath, cheating workers of their pay, cheating widows and orphans and immigrants, and who disrespected God by making second-rate offerings? It is easy to join in this condemnation, but there is a lesson for all those in every age who consider themselves God's special people, his special servants, his church. Take the warning from Malachi. Do not get slack. Do I myself need to be purified? *He will purify the Levites, refining them like silver or gold, until he finds them to be men who will bring honest sacrifices.*

O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion get thee up into a high mountain. Lift up your voice with strength. Lift it up. Be not afraid. Say unto the cities of Judah, behold your God. (Is.40.9)

We are back in Isaiah 40. Good news to tell - effectively. What good news is it? Verse 10 - "*See, the Lord God comes with might and his arm rules for him. His reward is with him, and his recompense before him.*" It is God acting, taking command, putting things right.

Surely, this is good news. But when? Should those who were listening to the prophet expect it right away? (the people were actually restored to their land at that time). Or should the readers wait, expectant generation after generation, for God to act? (they were still waiting when Jesus came). Or are we still waiting for his work to be completed? (though indeed he has been working in the hearts and minds of millions already). Whoever has good news to tell dare not be afraid to tell it. Not just the towns of Judah, but the whole world is waiting.

Jerusalem, go up on a high mountain and proclaim the good news. Call out with a loud voice, Zion, announce the good news. Speak out and do not be afraid. Tell the towns of Judah that their God is coming.

The next verses selected in 'The Messiah' fill out the picture: darkness covering the earth, and then a great light shining (Is.60.2). The 'highlights' omit this and leap forward to the prophecy of Isaiah 9.6, of the Messiah actually being born. And look who he is!

For unto us a child is born and unto us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called wonderful counsellor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the prince of peace.

Again the choice of music leaps forward again to the shepherds in the fields near Bethlehem, and the sound of the heavenly host.

Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth, goodwill towards men.
(Luke 2.14)

Messiah has come. He has come to be ruler over the nation that had been expecting him, but with an international mission. Ever since Abraham, the Israelites the descendants of Abraham had known that the reason they were chosen was to be a blessing to all the human race. That hope now has its focus in the child born at Bethlehem. So there is a lot of joy. But not yet widespread. One modern version instead of 'goodwill toward men' has peace 'toward those with whom he is pleased'. John's gospel, writing afterwards, says "He came to his own country, but his own people did not receive him. Some, however, did receive him and believed in him: so he gave them the right to become God's children." (John 1.11,12). Yet the prophet Zechariah urges the nation:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion, shout O daughter of Jerusalem. Behold thy king cometh unto thee. [He is a righteous saviour.] and he shall speak peace unto the heathen.

These words are from Zechariah 9.9 and 10. In Zechariah these verses are written in the context of their land being protected. No more foreign armies sweeping through. No more foreign dictators, but their own peaceful king who will impose peace on their neighbours. If only they had accepted him when he came! However, he did come. He does speak peace.

Shout for joy you people of Jerusalem - look, your king is coming to you... your king will make peace among the nations.

He shall feed his flock like a shepherd and he shall gather his lambs with his arm and carry them in his bosom and gently lead those that are with young.
(Is.40.11)

We are back in Isaiah 40, but in our minds is Jesus, saying 'I am the good shepherd.'

Like a shepherd he will care for his flock, gathering the lambs in his arms, hugging them as he carries them, leading the nursing ewes to good pasture.

In Matthew 11.28, Jesus says "Come to me... and I will give you rest." The version Handel used says, 'Come unto him'.

Come unto him all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and he will give you rest. Take his yoke upon you and learn of him, for he is meek and lowly of heart, and ye shall find rest for your souls.

This is the way the Messiah is ruling - with the consent of the governed, we might say. All governments depend on the consent of those they govern, even if they compel the consent by force. But the Messiah earns more than

consent, he receives our gratitude, our deep thankfulness, our love.

The 'Christmas Highlights' end at this point. It is far from the end of Christ's story. There is sin, rejection, death; there is resurrection to glory; there is a gospel age to follow, and a work of preaching; there is the time to come when *the kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ and he shall reign for ever and ever*. 'Worthy is the Lamb that was slain!'

Hallelujah!

Note: thinking back over the experience of listening to this music, there have been four things in particular which I found encouraging.

1. The prophets with their words of hope and joy for the Israelites of old.
2. Jesus Christ actually arriving and beginning his kindly ministry.
3. The vision of his final victory.
4. The compulsion to let the good news be known.

GC

THE STORYTELLER

Part 2

As told by Nathanael

Some of these little stories he certainly told for our benefit, but, as often as not, he'd be talking to crowds of ordinary people – in the market-place, by the lake, wherever. Often, people would be moved by what he said, and perhaps someone would call out, "Lord, Lord!" "Why do you keep calling me 'Lord, Lord!'", he says, "when you don't do what I say? I'll show you what it's like when someone comes to me, listens to my teaching and then follows it: it's like a person building a house who digs down deep and lays his foundations on solid rock. When the rains come and the floodwaters rise and break against the house, it'll stand firm, because it's been well built. But anyone who hears and doesn't obey what I say is like a person who builds a house without any real foundations at all. When the floods sweep down against that house, it'll simply collapse into a heap of ruins."

And here's another of his little stories about building: "A rich man had a fertile farm", he says, "producing some fine crops. So he says to himself, 'What shall I do now? I don't have room to store all my crops.' So he says, 'I know! I'll tear down my existing barns and build bigger ones. Then I'll have

room enough to store all my wheat and my other goods. Then I'll sit back and say to myself, "My friend, you've enough stored away for years to come. Now take it easy! Eat, drink, and be merry!" But God says to him, 'You fool! This very night, you're going to die, and then who's going to get everything you worked so hard for?' Yes, I tell you, a person is a fool to store up earthly wealth, but not have a rich relationship with God."

The little group who were following Jesus gradually became a bit more clearly defined. There were a fair number of us, in fact, including quite a lot of women, but eventually he chose just twelve of us 'regulars', to form a kind of 'inner group' of men. As John the Baptist had done, he called us his 'disciples' (which means 'teachable people') – later on, of course, we would also become known as 'apostles' (which means 'people sent out').

Word about this remarkable young Teacher soon got around, and we'd often find ourselves surrounded by some very large crowds, all eager to hear what he had to say. Mostly, they were 'locals' from Galilee, but there were often a few 'High-ups' from Jerusalem there, too – Law-Teachers, Scribes, Pharisees, those kind of people – checking up on Jesus, I suppose, to make sure he was 'toeing the party line'. To be honest with you, I was pretty scared of them – always whispering to one another and asking awkward questions. I don't think they really wanted to learn anything from him! They thought they knew better, I suppose.

I mentioned before that one of the places where Jesus would choose to talk to the crowds was along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. That was fine when there were just 30 or 40 people, but if the crowds grew much bigger than that it became a problem, because there's not much shoreline along the lake – just room enough to pull up a few boats out of the water – that's all, really. So, since some of the other disciples are fishermen, one afternoon he says to a couple of them, "I'll just hop into your boat, and preach to them from there!" So they pushed the boat a few yards out into the lake, and he talked to the crowds from there. It worked like a charm!

There are fields all round the lake, sloping down towards the water, and Jesus points out a farmer nearby, trudging along across his field, scattering seed all the way. It's quite a skilled job, actually – you can always tell if the seed has been sown evenly, by an experienced hand, once the wheat begins to show! "Listen!", he says, "A farmer just like that chap went out to plant some seed. As he scattered it across his field, some of the seed fell on the path, and the birds came and gobbled it up. Other seed fell on shallow soil, with underlying rock; the seed sprouted quickly, because the soil was shallow, but the plant soon wilted under the hot sun, and since it didn't have any deep roots, it died. Yet other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked out the tender plants, so they produced no grain; but still other seeds fell on fertile

soil. They sprouted, grew, and produced a crop that was thirty, sixty – even a hundred times as much as had been planted! Anyone with the ears to hear”, he says, “should listen and understand!”

We did try to understand him, but – to be honest – most of us weren't really too sure what he'd been getting at! So, later, when the crowds had gone home, we asked him what his story meant, and he explained that it was all about something he called 'The Kingdom of God', and how different people respond to the Good News that he was bringing – his Essential Message – in different ways. The 'seed' he'd been talking about was the Word of God, so you'd think that everyone would want to receive it eagerly, but it doesn't work out like that, and just as those seeds didn't all sprout equally, so people would receive his Message in different ways. How true that would prove to be, later on!

Of course, we all wanted to know more about this 'Kingdom of God' – we knew a good deal about Kingdoms, in those days, but what we saw of Herod's Kingdom, for example, wasn't very encouraging, to say the least! Neither was what we saw of the Roman Empire, in those parts: to us, it seemed impersonal and oppressive.

Often, Jesus would refer to this 'kingdom' as 'The Kingdom of Heaven'; I suppose he'd picked up that expression from John the Baptist, whose rallying-cry was always, “Repent of your sins, and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near!” On one occasion, I remember asking him, “Master, what's this 'Kingdom of Heaven' like, that you keep talking about?” And, as so often, he would answer a question like that by telling us stories.

And what a great Storyteller Jesus was! – he had lots of word-pictures to share with us! For example, here's another one about a farmer: he plants good seed in his field, but then his enemy comes along and plants weeds alongside the good stuff. What to do? – rip up the weeds? “No,” says Jesus, “let them both grow together until harvest; otherwise you might damage the good crop as you're trying to uproot the bad stuff. Then, at harvest-time, you can keep the weeds on one side, and burn them.” I'm pretty sure now that he was really talking about people! “The Kingdom of Heaven”, he says, “is like a mustard seed planted in a field. It's only a tiny little seed,” he says, “but it'll become a whacking great tree, and birds'll come and make their nests in its branches.”

Maybe he realised that people were finding it hard to follow what he was trying to tell them about this 'Kingdom of Heaven', for he used lots of other illustrations, as well. Yeast – one little spoonful will spread through a whole batch of dough, to transform it into a beautiful loaf of bread. Treasure Trove – you stumble across an undiscovered 'hoard', in a field, and so you go and sell everything you possess in order to buy that field, and make the treasure yours! Or a Pearl – one of inestimable value; the knowledgeable

merchant is prepared to sell everything he has in order to acquire that one lovely pearl.

Jesus knew that several of the disciples were fishermen, and I guess that's why he sometimes used illustrations about fishing. This one was especially graphic, and a bit frightening, I thought. "The Kingdom of Heaven", he says, "is like a fishing net that was thrown into the water and caught fish of every kind. When the net was full, they dragged it up onto the shore, sat down, and sorted the good fish into crates, but they threw the bad ones away." So far, so good – that's exactly what we saw the fishermen doing when they came ashore with their catch. But he went on to explain what he meant: "That's the way it's going to be at the end of the world. The angels will come and separate the wicked people from the righteous, throwing the wicked into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Scary, or what?

So maybe that's what he'd been trying to tell us, all the time! Seed, weeds, yeast, treasure, pearls, and now fish – they were all stories about what was going to happen at what he called 'the end of the world', and how important it was that we all should use this life really well.

To be continued

BK-S

“Be still, and know that I am God....”

In the silence of the night there are sounds that come upon the ear, ordinary sounds which in the hustle of the daytime pass unnoticed. From the fireplace comes the sound of flickering flames, whose miniature roar tells of all those fires which have burned through all the centuries. A chair creaks, as wooden things have ever creaked, whether the contemporary table or the milkmaid's stool, or the straining arms of some gaunt forest giant twisted by the gales of a thousand years ago. In the distance a child cries in protest, and then is quietly lulled to rest. Just in such a way must the first child have rebelled against its parents, and just as gently must it have given way to slumber.

And then, amid these faint sounds which are as it were the echo of all history, comes a droning as an aircraft passes across the darkened sky; a rumble, as a train careers over the moonlit countryside; a whine and rattle as a car sharply draws to a standstill. Its door clicks open, and is closed with a slam, as if to emphasise the point that we are in a new age. Beside the quiet whisperings of immemorial nature we have the hustle of men going to and fro,

exulting in the power of a knowledge that is increased.

It is a new age, and yet it is not new. For the men who drive the motors or pilot the jet planes, the women and children who are their passengers, are just like the men, women and children of a thousand years ago. When we hear of disorderly teenagers, of strikes, disputes, international tension, disasters, suicide, sin; or of courage, heroism and self-sacrifice, we are hearing of things that have existed since earliest times. When there is no more sorrow, pain or death, that will be a new age; when there is no more selfishness and sin, then a new age will truly be here. Science cannot bring these things about. Only God can.

So we live our lives together through the busy day and the quiet night: and so the tapestry of human history is woven out of the twining strands, happiness and care. Yet once and again nature's routine is broken. It was broken once when God sent His Son into the world, that occasion which we so imperfectly commemorate at Christmas. It will be broken again when Jesus' kingdom is established on earth.

"I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth. The Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge." Psalm 46.10,11.

From Midland Newsletter, December 1959

Quiz Answers

The Bible references are given. As for the fact about each person, you will need to look up the reference for yourself!

- | | | |
|---------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| 1. NT Mark 5/Luke 8 | 2. NT Matthew 27 | 3. OT 2 Kings 5 |
| 4. NT Philemon 1 | 5. NT Luke 19 | 6. OT Daniel 3 |
| 7. NT Acts 10 | 8. NT Luke 1 | 9. NT Acts 20 |
| 10. NT Acts 16 | 11. OT Genesis 39 | 12. OT Genesis 4 |
| 13. OT 2 Samuel 11 | 14. NT Acts 9 | 15. NT 2 Timothy 1 |
| 16. OT Judges 11 | 17. NT Luke 24 | 18. OT Ruth 1 |
| 19. NT Acts 21 | 20. OT 1 Samuel 25 | 21. NT Matthew 2 |
| 22. NT Acts 25 | 23. NT Acts 19 | 24. NT Acts 27 |
| 25. NT Acts 18 | | |

A CAROL

A cradle stands within the stall
Before it bands of angels fall
This little One
Is God's own Son,
Immanuel.

His eyes, more bright than stars above,
Will shine with light of perfect love,
With gentle look
Our pride rebuke,
Our fears remove.

His hands will toil to help the poor,
The sick and frail to health restore,
And strengthen all
Who on Him call
For evermore.

His eager feet will swiftly fly
Along the straight appointed way,
And follow still
The Father's will
To Calvary.

His tender brow, untouched by care.
Our joys will know, our sorrows share
And for our wrongs
The cruel thorns
Will gladly bear.

His heart will share man's deep distress;
Was ever there such tenderness? -
That dares the grave
The lost to save
The least to bless.

O Jesu sweet, of Thee we sing,
Lay at Thy feet our offering:
On bended knee
We worship Thee,
Dear Lord and king.

MK-S

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