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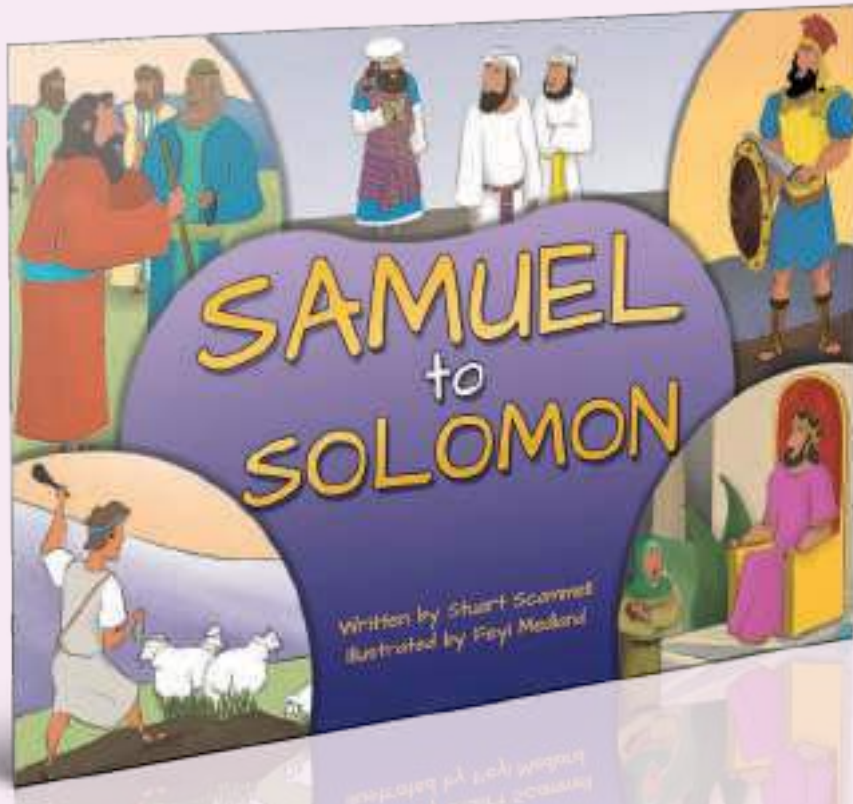
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'There was a swarm of bees and honey
in the carcase of the lion', Judg. 14. 8.

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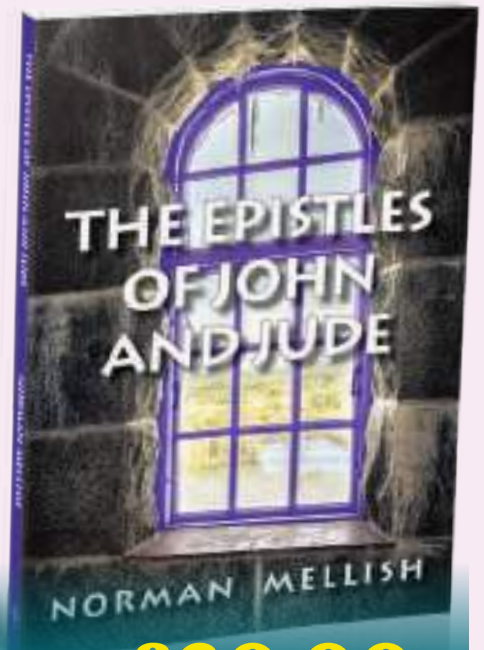
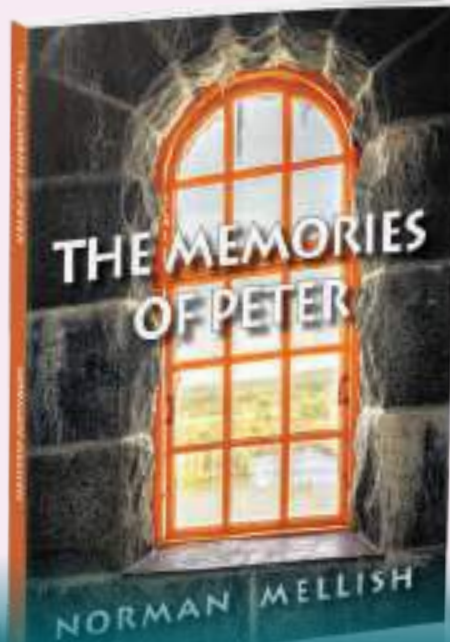
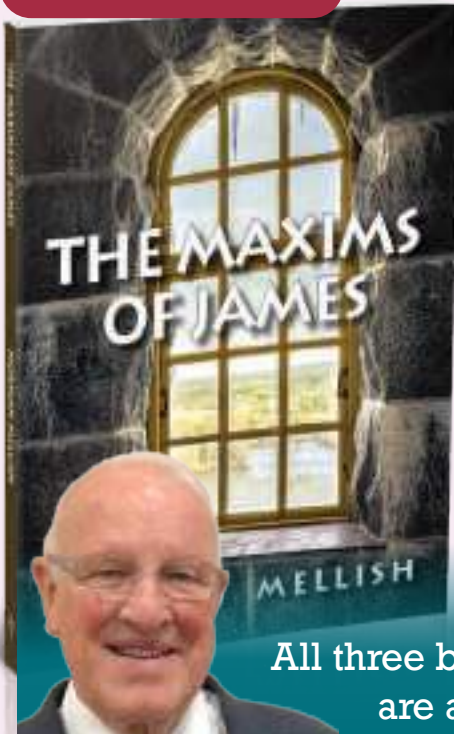
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'Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is', Heb. 10. 25.

There are four distinct uses of the word 'church' in the New Testament. The word is derived from two words that mean 'called out' and it is invariably applied to a company of persons called out. It is never applied to a building in which people congregate. Depending on who or what cause has gathered out, the people gives character to the 'church'.

In Acts chapter 7 verse 38, the 'church in the wilderness' refers to the people that were called out of Egypt in response to the call of God to 'hold a feast unto' Him, Exod. 5. 1.

In Acts chapter 19 verse 32, we find in the Ephesian theatre an assembly [same word as 'church'] of craftsmen, called out and stirred up by Demetrius, a silversmith who clearly saw the gospel as a threat to his trade in idolatry. Interestingly, the word translated 'church' in verse 37 is a different word from the word translated 'assembly' in verse 32. It is the word for what implies a building. This word is never used in scripture to describe a gathered-out people. We should carefully note that it is easy to mis-apply the word 'church' to

the place where we meet and describe it as our 'church'. Maybe it is a reason why, in a world where such confusion is commonplace, it might be helpful to use the term 'assembly' when referring to the gatherings of believers. As one brother memorably taught us, 'It's the people and not the steeple!'

The third application of the word 'church' is found, for example, in Ephesians chapter 1 verses 22 and 23. Referring to Christ, Paul declares that He has been given as 'the head over all things to the church, which is his body'. This refers to the entity comprised of the entire company of all those who have, and will trust Christ, from Pentecost to the rapture. These are those who have been 'called out' according to divine purpose and constitute that immense conglomeration united in Christ and ultimately to be seen as His 'bride, the Lamb's wife', Rev. 21. 9. What a great display that will be! What an amazing sight – to see so many that have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb! Let us never lose sight of the indescribable debt we owe to our Saviour. His will be the glory!

The fourth use of the word 'church' is to be found, for example, in 1 Corinthians chapter 1 verse 2. Clearly, this is being applied to a gathering of believers in a specific geographical location. It is vital to note that God always intends that once we are saved (and baptized), we should physically gather together with other believers. Such gatherings consist of those 'called out' from the kingdom of darkness for the purpose of displaying the order that gives God's well-beloved Son the honour due to Him. We do well to note that every local assembly gathering is for His glory. They are defined by His presence and should be governed by what gives Him His rightful place – not for the display of human talents. And if this be so, what would prevent us being at every assembly gathering? Miss the meeting and miss the blessing! Are you present at all that you can be? In days where attendance is seemingly becoming 'optional', let us remember why we gather and, if we truly love Him, then keep His commandments.

Ken Totton

Ministry Articles Editor

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Words at the Cross

Words spoken by the Lord Jesus on the cross

By **MERVYN WISHART** Newcastle, Northern Ireland

Part 2

Each of the seven sayings of the Saviour from the cross reveals a fundamental truth about God. In this article, we shall be thinking of 'The God of forgiveness' – 'Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do', Luke 23. 34.

Devotional

The enormity of the crime

The crucifixion of the Lord Jesus was the most heinous crime ever perpetrated on earth. Of all acts of cruelty that have stained the pages of history, none can compare with man's treatment of the Son of God at Calvary. In that foul deed, the extremity of the evil in the heart of man was revealed. The four Gospel writers each use an economy of words to describe the act of crucifixion.¹ CAMPBELL MORGAN referred to the use of these few words as 'reverent reticence'.² May we be ever mindful as we draw near to the cross that we stand on holy ground.

Mark is the only Gospel writer who records the time of the crucifixion, 'And it was the third hour, and they crucified him', 15. 25. Immediately following the crucifixion, Luke records, 'Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do'. The soldiers must have been amazed at these, the first words spoken by the Lord on the cross. Not the unsavoury utterances that they would have expected from someone being crucified; but this man was different. Peter wrote, 'Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not', 1 Pet. 2. 23.

The magnanimity of grace

His prayer was not for Himself but for the soldiers. In the words, 'Then said Jesus', the verb is in the imperfect tense, indicating that they were repeated again and again.

With one word He could have called more than twelve legions of angels, Matt. 26. 53. But that word remained unspoken. The Saviour's prayer was in accord with His teaching on the mountain, 'pray for them which despitefully use you . . . that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven', Matt. 5. 44, 45.

The first saying from the cross revealed the magnanimity of God's grace, 'Father, forgive them'. 'But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound', Rom. 5. 20. What the soldiers did, represented man at his worst: he could stoop no lower. By contrast, in His prayer we see man at his noblest and best in the man Christ Jesus.

The words were a prayer. His public ministry had begun with prayer, Luke 3. 21. His ministry on earth concluded with prayer. He prayed three times on the cross: the first, the fourth and the seventh sayings. The first prayer and the third prayer were addressed to His Father. His life on earth was lived in unbroken fellowship with His Father in heaven. Only He could say, 'And he that sent me is with me: the Father hath not left me alone; for I do always those things that please him', John 8. 29.

On no occasion had He to pray, 'Father, forgive me'. He never sinned in thought, word or deed. But rather, He prayed, 'forgive them', referring to the soldiers.

The veracity of scripture

In this one verse, two prophecies were fulfilled. The first, '[He] made intercession for the transgressors',

Isa. 53. 12. The second was fulfilled in what the soldiers did. In Psalm 22 verse 18, more than 1,000 years before, David wrote, 'They part my garments among them, and cast lots upon my vesture', and this was fulfilled as John records, 19. 23, 24. They divided the other garments in four parts, 'to every soldier a part', v. 23, confirming that there were four soldiers. There were four women at the cross. They were there because of their devotion to Christ, but the soldiers were there out of duty. They divided His garments at the foot of the cross, considering Him to be as good as dead, with no further need of clothing.

The fact that they turned so soon to divide His garments showed that they had little thought for the man on the cross. It was all in a day's work for them. They joined with others who mocked the Saviour, approaching Him and taunting Him, offering Him vinegar to drink.

They were, albeit unwittingly, guilty of the greatest possible sin in crucifying Christ. Those who gave the order for the execution were ignorant of who He was, 1 Cor. 2. 8. After the day of Pentecost, Peter said, 'And now, brethren, I wot that through ignorance ye did it, as did also your rulers', Acts 3. 17.

Was the prayer of the Lord Jesus for the soldiers answered? Matthew records, 'Now when the centurion, and they that were with him, watching Jesus, saw the earthquake . . . they feared greatly, saying, Truly this was the Son of God', 27. 54. 'Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God', 1 John 5. 1.

Doctrinal

The means of forgiveness

On the night prior to His crucifixion, the Lord Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper in the Upper Room. After He had broken the bread, He took the cup, saying, 'For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins', Matt. 26. 28. Paul emphasized that the forgiveness of sins is a great blessing, which the believer enjoys presently, Eph. 1. 7.

The message of forgiveness

How significant, then, that the first words from the lips of the Saviour on the cross were 'Father, forgive them'. He was referring to the soldiers, but His work on the cross has ensured that forgiveness is available to all who are willing to receive it. After His resurrection, He commanded that 'repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem', Luke 24. 47.

The meaning of forgiveness

One word for forgiveness in the original language is *nasa*, meaning, 'to lift up, or away'.³

How glad we should be that the burden of our sins has been lifted up, and that they are taken away forever. 'As far as the east is from the west', Ps. 103. 12; 'cast . . . into the depths of the sea', Micah 7. 19. The meaning is, 'the removing of sin from the sinner'. Here is the secret of happiness; not a secret concealed, but clearly revealed. 'Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered', Ps. 32. 1.

A few of the multitude of references in scripture to God's forgiveness cover:

- The word of a patriarch (spoken by the Lord, recorded by Moses): 'Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin', Exod. 34. 7.
- The word of a psalmist: 'But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared', Ps. 130. 4.
- The word of a prophet: 'Thou art a God ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness', Neh. 9. 17.
- The word of a preacher, the Apostle Paul: 'through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins', Acts 13. 38.

'Great God of wonders, all Thy ways
Display Thine attributes divine;
But the bright glories of Thy grace
Above Thine other wonders shine.
Who is a pardoning God like thee,
Or who has grace so rich and free?'
[SAMUEL DAVIES, 1723-1761]

Practical

Family forgiveness

The first mention of forgiveness in scripture is in Genesis chapter 50 verses 17 to 21. Jacob was about to die; he sent a messenger to his son, Joseph, saying, 'Forgive, I pray thee now, the trespass of thy brethren, and their sin; for they did unto thee evil'. Joseph acceded to his father's request and said to his brothers, 'Fear not . . . he comforted them, and spake kindly unto them'. This was forgiveness within a family. Joseph forgave their sin in so far as it affected him, but he could not forgive their sin against God. He asked, 'Am I in the place of God?' v. 19.

The forgiveness that believers enjoy

Our sins are forgiven the moment we believe, 'Whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins', Acts 10. 43. May we never lose the wonder of that glorious fact. A lifetime of sins, forgiven in a moment of time: our sins are dealt with fully, finally, and eternally. The Apostle John writes of the necessity of continuing to examine our lives and to confess our sin, to maintain fellowship with God, 1 John 1. 9.

The first is a once-for-all forgiveness of sins past, present, and future; thereby we have union with Christ. The second is an ongoing forgiveness that is promised to those who confess all known sin to the Lord and forgive the wrongs of others towards them, Matt. 6. 12, thereby restoring communion with Him.

Forgiving others

'Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him', Luke 17. 3, 4. In their desire to rise to such a challenge, the apostles said to the Lord, 'Increase our faith', v. 5.

Ephesians chapter 4 verse 32 says, 'And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake has forgiven you'. We should never be

looking for a reason not to forgive, but rather to show a forgiving spirit to all. The Lord has forgiven us, and with that thought in our minds, we ought to forgive others. Those 'forgiven' should be ready to forgive. In Matthew chapter 18 verses 23 to 30, the Lord spoke of a king who forgave one of his servants an enormous debt of ten thousand talents. The servant who had been forgiven had a fellow servant who owed him one hundred pence, but he refused to forgive him that small amount.

If we harbour hard thoughts towards another believer, it causes bitterness within our own soul, and robs us of the full joy of salvation. The 'root of bitterness' mentioned in Hebrews, 12. 15, spreads, and affects others. As with all root systems, if left unchecked it becomes more difficult to eradicate. Bitterness corrodes the container in which it is carried. One of the heaviest burdens to carry in life is a grudge against another believer.

It is as a warning against the harmful effects of bitterness to us that the Lord prefaced the section in Luke chapter 17 by saying, 'Take heed to yourselves'. When the Lord taught His disciples to pray, the only thing they were asked to profess was, 'as we forgive our debtors', Matt. 6. 12.

An unforgiving spirit hinders prayer, 'And when ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have ought against any: that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses', Mark 11. 25; 'ought against any' includes everyone and excludes none.

The words of the Saviour from the cross should fill our hearts with the joy of our forgiveness, and challenge us to show a forgiving spirit towards others.

'Thy foes might hate, despise, revile;
Thy friends unfaithful prove.
Unwearied in forgiveness still,
Thy heart could only love'.
[EDWARD DENNY 1796-1889]

Endnotes

- 1 Matt 27. 35; Mark 15. 24; Luke 23. 33; John 19. 18.
- 2 G. CAMPBELL MORGAN, *Studies in The Four Gospels*, Oliphants, pg. 266.
- 3 This is a Hebrew word, the one behind 'forgiven', Ps. 32. 1.

TITLES OF JEHOVAH 1

JEHOVAH JIREH

By **MARK SWEETNAM** Dublin, Ireland

Sometime about 2100 BC, a man called Abram, living in Ur of the Chaldees, heard the call of God. The call was clear, uncompromising, and very costly. 'Get thee', said God, 'out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee', Gen. 12. 1. Abram, against every natural instinct, responded to the God of glory who not only spoke, but appeared to him, Acts 7. 2, and, leaving his home behind, embarked on one of the most remarkable lives of pilgrimage recorded in scripture. He wasted no time in establishing the template of that life. Scarcely had he left Haran when he built his first altar to the true God, and before long he gave telling testimony to the priority that he placed on worship, for, arriving between Bethel and Hai, he 'pitched his tent . . . [and] builded an altar', Gen. 12. 8. As he had begun so he continued – Abraham's life was marked consistently by obedience to God, dependence upon God, and the worship of God.

From the day that he left Haran behind, Abraham had many remarkable experiences. His communion with and his communication from God, his growing experience of divine power, and his increasing knowledge of God's character led to his being called, with a unique and special dignity, the friend of God, Isa. 41. 8. But the greatest climax of his life was not when he, in the horror of a great darkness, heard God reaffirm His covenant with Abraham, and pass, like 'a smoking furnace, and a burning lamp' through the pieces of the dismembered offering, Gen. 15. 17. Nor did it take place when God asked, 'Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do?' and took him into His confidence about the judgement about to fall on Sodom, giving Abraham the opportunity to plead for the inhabitants of that sinful city, 18. 17.

The true climax of Abraham's life was ushered in by another call of God. No less clear and uncompromising than the first (which it unmistakably echoes), it was incalculably more costly. 'Abraham', said God, 'Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into

the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of', 22. 2. Just as God had carefully specified the costliness of His first call – 'thy country . . . thy kindred . . . thy father's house' – so now His identification of Isaac as 'thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest' makes the cost as plain – and as appalling – as it could possibly be. Spoken to any father, such a request would have been shattering, but, having followed Abraham's story through Genesis, having waited with him through the years of barrenness, having mourned with him over the terrible consequences of his effort to solve by human means a problem that he should – and could – have left safely in God's hands, and having heard the promises that could only be fulfilled if Isaac lived, we know the true magnitude of God's demand.

Knowing its magnitude, we can, perhaps, begin to imagine the emotions that filled Abraham's heart as he grasped the meaning of God's request. And imagine them we must, for all that Abraham says to God is his initial 'here I am'.¹ Abraham's silence, his refusal to query or debate God's words, to express any of the thoughts

and questions that must have been teeming through his brain, is one of the most remarkable elements of this remarkable story. The man who had established obedience and worship as the template of his life was not now going to depart from it. Silently and submissively, though surely with a breaking heart, he readied himself, his servants, and his son for the journey to the appointed place. When he does speak, his words to his servants and to his son are eloquent of the same priority and the same confidence in God that had been so strikingly seen in his departure from Haran. To his servants he said, 'Abide ye here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you', v. 5. This was no dissimulation, designed to spare their feelings or to prevent them from interfering with his purpose. He went to offer his son upon the altar, but he did so in the assurance 'that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead', Heb. 11. 19. He must have wondered how, but his ignorance of the details was no obstacle to the faith that assured him that he and the lad, both, would come again. His response to Isaac's query was more remarkable still. His words may well suggest that he had an inkling of what God might do, 'My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering', Gen. 22. 8. Framed, as it is, by the repeated phrase, 'they went both of them together', this single exchange emphasizes, in a very moving way, their isolation and intimacy as they moved towards the place of sacrifice.

And provide He did. Not until Isaac was bound and the knife raised, not until Abraham had given full and incontrovertible proof of the reality of his fear of God, but before Isaac suffered any harm, the voice came again, 'Abraham, Abraham'. Abraham's response was identical with his answer to the first call, 'Here am I', v. 11. The demands of God's earlier call in no way affected his alertness and attention to the divine voice. It spoke now with a message of reprieve. Abraham had passed the test, and God would not demand the shedding of Isaac's blood. This time, He speaks, not as *Elohim*, but as 'the angel of the Lord', the first appearance of the

name of Jehovah in this narrative. 'He who requires from Abraham the surrender of Isaac is God the creator . . . but it is [Jehovah] in His angel who forbids the extreme act, for the son of promise cannot perish'.² And, as Abraham's arm is arrested, his words to Isaac are revealed as prophetic. God did provide himself a lamb, 'a ram caught in a thicket by his horns', v. 13, provided by God, and ready to be offered 'in the stead' of Isaac.

Such momentous events could not go uncommemorated, and so Abraham builds his final altar and names the mountain 'Jehovah-jireh', v. 14. In verse 8, Abraham speaks of God by His creatorial title *Elohim*, rather than Jehovah, but the verb is identical to that used here. *Elohim*, the Creator God, would provide, Abraham had reassured Isaac. But it is the covenant-keeping Jehovah who gives His name to this place, the name last used (before verse 8) at the beginning of chapter 21 in connection with the birth of Isaac. As in English, the Hebrew verb translated 'provide' has both the sense of seeing a need and meeting it.³ Apart from its appearance in verses 8 and 14 (twice), the verb also forms part of the name Moriah, which means 'seen of Jehovah'. There is an emphasis on sight throughout the story – Abraham 'lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off',



v. 4. Isaac, on the lonely walk up the mountain said, 'Behold the fire and the wood', v. 7. At the climax of the story, 'Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind him a ram caught in a thicket by his horns', v. 13. Man's seeing is purely reactive – Isaac sees what his father has provided, Abraham sees God's place and God's provision. God's seeing is different. He sees before and sees to provide. That duality is reflected in the gloss on the name 'Jehovah-jireh': 'In the mount of the Lord it shall be seen' can also be rendered (and is in many translations), 'On the mount of the Lord it [or he] shall be provided'. The expression could also be rendered, 'in the mountain the Lord will appear', NET footnote.

The precise import of this expression is somewhat ambiguous, but it undoubtedly points us towards the future significance of Moriah. The mountain is mentioned by name on only one other occasion in scripture, 2 Chr. 3. 1, "Then Solomon began to build the house of the Lord at Jerusalem in mount Moriah, where the Lord appeared unto David his father, in the place that David had prepared in the threshingfloor of Ornan the Jebusite". This fact explains the reference to 'the mountain of the Lord'. The 'mountain/hill of the Lord' refers to the temple, emphasizing the elevation involved in approaching God.⁴ In this connection, this saying 'seems to be a play on the double application of the word: Jehovah "sees" the needs of those who come to worship Him in Zion, and then "is seen", i.e. reveals Himself to them by answering their prayers, and bestowing upon them the blessings of His providence and aid: His "seeing", in other words, takes practical effect in a "being seen".⁵ From a New Testament perspective, it is this point that Paul emphasizes with his allusion to Genesis chapter 22, 'He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?' Rom. 8. 32. The Lord who provided Himself a Lamb is still the God of Abraham, and still the God of Jehovah-jireh.

Before we leave Jehovah-jireh, we should notice its consequences for

Abraham. We have already noticed some of the echoes of Genesis chapter 12 in this narrative. Now, God reiterates, reinforces, and amplifies the promises He had made to Abraham when He first called him. Three features, at least, of God's words underscore the intensification of His earlier promise. Firstly, God swears by Himself on only a handful of occasions: in this passage; Isa. 45. 23; Jer. 22. 5; and 49. 13.⁶ As the writer to the Hebrews emphasizes, that oath provides an unshakeable certainty, Heb. 6. 17, 18. Secondly, the expression 'saith the Lord' in verse 16 uses a word that describes not just general speech, but a prophetic utterance or oracle. Thirdly, the Hebrew construction 'in blessing I will bless . . . in multiplying I will multiply' emphasizes the certainty of the blessing, 'I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply' ESV. Whatever room there might have been for doubt in Abraham's mind before this point is reduced to nothing – nothing could be more certain than the divine declaration of enormous, unimaginable blessings to come.

Genesis chapter 22 is, literally and spiritually, one of the mountaintops of scripture. It is unquestionably the summit of Abraham's life, the climax of a pathway marked out by pitched tents and built altars, the pathway of a pilgrim and a worshipper who, by the time his journey drew to its close, had learned that the God who deserves all we have is the God who provided it in the first place.

Endnotes

- 1 WENHAM points out that 'it is surprising that [Abraham] cut the wood AFTER saddling his ass and gathering his servants and Isaac . . . The illogical order hints at Abraham's state of mind', GORDON J. WENHAM, *Genesis 16–50*, Word Biblical Commentary, Nelson.
- 2 FRANZ DELITZSCH, *A New Commentary on Genesis*, T&T Clark, 1888, 2:91.
- 3 'Provide' comes from the Latin *providere*: *pro* – before, *videre* – to see.
- 4 See: Isa. 2. 3; 30. 29; Ps. 24. 3.
- 5 S. R. DRIVER, *The Book of Genesis, with Introduction and Notes*, Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1920, pg. 220.
- 6 See also: Jer. 51. 14; Amos 6. 8, and possibly, Amos 4. 2; Jer. 44. 26.

THE TEACHING IN THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS

Part 5 – The old and the new covenants

By **ANDREW WILSON** Brisbane, Australia

All quotations are taken from NKJV unless otherwise indicated

Hebrews chapters 8 to 10 teach the superiority of the new covenant over the old, but this truth raises some puzzling questions. If Christ ‘offered one sacrifice for sins forever’, Heb. 10. 12, how can there possibly be a return to animal sacrifices in a future millennium? If the present-day church enjoys the blessings of the new covenant promised to Israel, Heb. 8, where does this leave ethnic Israel? If we are under the new covenant, are we still under the old covenant’s moral laws? Before investigating these questions, we must notice what Hebrews says about the covenants.

Hebrews chapter 8 verses 7 to 9 gives a reason for the new covenant: because Israel broke the old one. Then, in verses 10 to 12, God promised five great blessings under the new covenant: to write His laws on their hearts; to be their God and they His people; all would know Him from the least to the greatest; He would be merciful to their unrighteousness; and He would remember their sins no more. Verse 13 continues, ‘In that He says, “a new covenant”, He has made the first obsolete [“old” KJV, DARBY]’. What does this mean? The relationship between the old and new covenants is one of the most hotly contested issues in Christian debate.

Was the new covenant made with Israel or the Church?

The new covenant was specifically stated to be with ‘the house of Israel and with the house of Judah’, Heb. 8. 8; Jer. 31. 31. Yet, the book of Hebrews and the Lord’s Supper, Luke 22. 20

and parallels, assure believers today that we enjoy the blessings of the new covenant. But how can the promise of a new covenant made to ethnic Israel be fulfilled in the church?

Some, arguing for a present-day fulfilment, suggest that the church has replaced Israel in God’s purposes. HERMAN BAVINCK writes, ‘Not only did Jesus not expect anything from the Jews in the present; in the future also he expected nothing for them’.¹ BRUCE WALTKE says, ‘The Jewish nation no longer has a place as the special people of God; that place has been taken by the Christian community which fulfils God’s purpose for Israel’.²

However, Romans chapter 11 verses 26 and 27 speaks about the future conversion of the Jewish nation at the coming of Christ, ‘And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: “The Deliverer will come out of Zion, and He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob”’. Verse 27 states that Israel will come into the blessings of the new covenant at that time, ‘for this is My covenant with them, When I take away their sins’, a clear reference to the new covenant of Jeremiah chapter 31 verses 31 to 34. ERNST KÄSEMANN writes, ‘Christianity is already living in the new covenant’ while ‘Israel will begin to do so only at the *parousia*’ (that is, at Christ’s coming).³ While there is, at present, a fulfilment of Jeremiah’s prophecy in the church’s experience, one day the promise of the new covenant is going to be literally fulfilled to its original recipients, Israel.

Will animal sacrifices be reinstated?

Various Old Testament passages suggest that animal sacrifices will feature in the messianic age. Ezekiel’s vision of the restored temple (chapters 40 to 48) speaks of animal sacrifices by Levitical priests, 44. 15.⁴ How can God ‘wind the clock back’ to old covenant conditions?

Ezekiel’s temple vision is best understood as millennial for four reasons. First, the river of life flowing out of the temple, with trees for healing, Ezek. 47. 1-12, point us to Revelation’s future scene, Rev. 22. 1, 2. Yet, second, Ezekiel is not picturing the eternal state because we also read about sin, death, birth, learning, judging, and time in Ezekiel.⁵ Third, with no sin, there will be no animal sacrifices in eternity. Fourth, a millennial temple suggests itself because Ezekiel places it after an ethnic Jewish national conversion, regathering to their land, and political re-establishment under the Messiah, chapters 34 to 39.

A spiritual temple (merely teaching moral lessons, either to Israel, or the church today) is hard to accept because the dimensions and specifications are so many and so minutely described. What lesson shall we draw from the thirteen-cubit gateway, Ezek. 40. 11? Bad luck? If the temple is meant to teach morals, why are so few lessons taught in these chapters? If the temple is meant to picture the New Testament church, cp. Eph. 2. 20-22, why are the mechanics of animal sacrifice described, Ezek. 40. 38-43; 42. 13 and what relevance have the tribal land allotments, Ezek. 48?

But if Ezekiel’s vision is a millennial scene, how can there be a reversion to animal sacrifices? One point to note is that the animal sacrifices in Ezekiel are not the same as we find in the Law. Thus, if we compare Ezekiel chapter 45 verses 18 to 25 with Numbers chapters 28 and 29, we find different sacrifices offered on the Day of Atonement, which is itself on a different day. There are only two other feasts (Passover and Tabernacles) – no mention of Firstfruits, Pentecost, or Trumpets.

Further, the holy city does not appear to be in the same location as present-day Jerusalem, cp. 48. 1-20. So, the sacrificial system in Ezekiel is not quite a 'reversion' to the law of Moses.

While there is sin in the millennium, Isa. 65. 20, sometimes meriting the death penalty, 11. 4, remedies are also required for sins which fall short of this, helping remind citizens that sin cannot be ignored, but must be repented of and punished. Animal sacrifices would seem to perform a didactic function (as teaching aids), combining elements of a penalty, public deterrent, religious penance, and a reminder of the one sacrifice for sins for ever – Christ.

Are Christians under the old covenant law?

If Christians are not under the old covenant, how shall we live? Must we keep Sabbath, or tithe, or abstain from shellfish? Some would argue that we are not under the law for

salvation, but the law still governs how Christians should live (Calvin's 'third use of the law').⁶

However, the Christian is not under the law as a rule of life.⁷ The context of these new covenant verses in Hebrews is not ceremonial or civil aspects of the law, but moral – how Christians should behave. The Christian is instead under the law of Christ, Gal. 6. 2; 1 Cor. 9. 21. We are not Moses' disciples – but follow the example and obey our Lord Jesus' teachings, not only in the Gospels, but also through His apostles' inspired Epistles. Nor is this antinomianism (a lawless licence to indulge in sin). Christ's law sets for us a higher, not a lower, standard than Moses, see Matthew chapter 5.

Where is the power for holy living under the new covenant? Instead of legalism, Rom. 7, which was for infancy, 'I took them by the hand to lead them out of . . . Egypt', Heb. 8. 9,

cp. Gal. 4, God has given us His Spirit, Rom. 8, putting His 'laws in their mind and writ[ing] them on their hearts', Heb. 8. 10; 10. 15, 16, cp. 2 Cor. 3. 3. Therefore, we should walk according to the Spirit and produce fruit to God, Rom. 7. 4; Gal. 5. 22, 23.

'The law is not the rule of the believer's life . . . Christ is our rule of life . . . the apostle does not say, To me to live is the law; but, "To me to live is Christ" . . . Christ is his object, his theme, his model, his rule, his hope, his joy, his strength, his all'.⁸

IRONSIDE wrote, 'If "Brethren" are heretics because they teach that *Christ*, not the law of Moses, is the rule of life, they are in excellent company . . . We are not under law (Rom. 6:14). We are neither saved by the law, nor under it, as a rule of life; we are not lawless, but "under law (enlawed) to Christ" [1 Cor. 9:20-21]. We stand firmly by the apostle Paul when he declares, "I through the law died unto the law that I might live to God" (Gal. 2:19). Is Christ himself a lower standard than the law given at Sinai? Or is the latter needed to complete the former? Surely no intelligent believer would so speak. This is not antinomianism, but its very opposite. It is subjection to Christ as Lord of the New Dispensation and Mediator of the New Covenant'.⁹



Endnotes

- 1 HERMAN BAVINCK, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1895, 1 Vol. abridged, Baker, 2011, pg. 733.
- 2 BRUCE WALTKE, 'Kingdom Promises as Spiritual', in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, Crossway, 1988, pg. 275.
- 3 ERNST KÄSEMANN, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. and ed. G. W. Bromiley, Eerdmans, 1980, pg. 314.
- 4 As does: Isa. 60. 7; Jer. 33. 17-22; and Zech. 14. 21.
- 5 See Ezek. 44. 23-25; 45. 18; 46. 16; 47. 22. See also other millennial paradise passages: Isa. 2, 11, 65 and 66.
- 6 J. CALVIN, *Institutes*, Book 2, Chapter 7. 12.
- 7 See Rom. 6. 14, 15; 7. 4-7; 1 Cor. 9. 19-21; Gal. 2. 19; 5. 18.
- 8 C. H. MACKINTOSH, 'The Sabbath, the Law, and Christian Ministry', *The Mackintosh Treasury*, Loizeaux Brothers, 1976, pp. 653-655. See also CHARLES RYRIE, *Basic Theology*, Moody, 1999, pp. 351, 352.
- 9 H. A. IRONSIDE, *A Historical Sketch of the Brethren Movement*, Zondervan, 1942, pp. 211, 212.

AN INTRODUCTION TO 1 PETER

By **BRIAN CLATWORTHY** Newbury, England

First Peter is a circular letter that was sent to a number of local churches scattered throughout Asia Minor. The letter is addressed to the exiles of the dispersion, which is reminiscent of expressions used in the Old Testament of the dispersion of Israel. MOYISE states that for its size, 1 Peter is second to Romans for its density of Old Testament quotations – eighteen in five chapters.¹ Importantly, the author applies these quotations from the Old Testament to explain and interpret the experiences of these Christian churches in Asia Minor.

Historic background

These local churches in Asia Minor lived under Roman law and were subject to the cult of emperor worship. SELWYN points out that the Jews were, however, exempt from this worship, and, as long as the Christians could be regarded as a branch of Judaism, they would enjoy the benefits of this exemption likewise. But once the relationship ceased to be presumed, their legal position was highly precarious.² They were, then, for all intents and purposes, resident aliens in a foreign land. This theme is used extensively by Peter to relate Israel's experience and exile as describing these scattered Christian communities in the world.

Major themes

Looking at the occurrence of certain words in 1 Peter, one can derive the themes of the book. These words are as follows:

- Suffer – eleven times.
- Subject, subordinate – six times.
- Way of life, conduct or behaviour – six times.

First, we consider the theme of suffering in the letter.

Suffering

Our letter makes it clear that these churches were experiencing certain forms of suffering.³ But what sort of suffering and when? In our view, this letter was written by Peter sometime during the reign of the emperor Nero. In his introduction to 1 Peter, A. F. WALLS suggests that

the most satisfactory date is a little before the outbreak of the Neronian persecutions in AD 63 or 64.⁴ SELWYN considers that the death of James, the Lord's brother, in AD 62 meant a decisive repudiation of Christianity by Judaism, and that it must have had awkward repercussions on the way in which the Roman Empire now came to regard Christianity.⁵ So Christians became 'exiles' in the world, being socially separated, culturally alienated, and with a certain degree of personal deprivation and suffering. What is difficult to discern from the letter is whether the suffering experienced by these churches was due to formal action being taken by the state against Christianity in general or whether it was more in the nature of sporadic and informal action taken by local communities. We list aspects of suffering that are identified by Peter in the table below. This shows how Christ's sufferings are placed in comparison with theirs as an encouragement, and as an example to be followed by them and by us.

Peter in his letter seems to distinguish between current trials,

1. 6, that cause these aspects of suffering, and an imminent fiery ordeal that would test them in the future, 4. 12. The imagery of the 'fiery ordeal', 4. 12 NIV, is, in our view, connected with testing for the purity of metals. Just as fire refines gold or silver, so suffering purifies and strengthens Christian faith. Refining metal was a common process in the ancient world, and Peter may well have drawn this analogy from the Old Testament.⁶ What Peter is doing is preparing his readers for more intense suffering in the future. He is also encouraging them not to regard the experience of suffering as simply an end in itself, but a means of growing in faith and apprehending the glory of Christ, 4. 13.

Although one of the leading themes in this letter is suffering and how it relates to the suffering of Christ,⁷ there is also an indissoluble link forged by Peter between the 'sufferings destined for Christ and the subsequent glory', 1. 11. Here is the keynote of the letter, namely Christian hope, and it is interesting to see how Peter, in encouraging those who are currently suffering, presents the eschatological hope of the glory of Christ.⁸ Not only are they encouraged to rejoice in their sufferings, but also to accept that it is through suffering that they closely follow the example of Christ, and this ultimately leads to glory, cp. Rom. 8. 18.

Subjection/subordination

Bearing in mind the historic background, the challenge for Christians during this period was how could they comply with the requirements of the state, and, at the same time, remain faithful to Christ? Put simply, how could they serve two masters at once?⁹ As Christianity became less identified as an adjunct of Judaism, it became increasingly

Aspects of suffering	Text(s)	Example of Christ
False allegations of wrongdoing, which might include immorality and criminal activity.	1 Pet. 2. 12 1 Pet. 3. 16 1 Pet. 4. 4	Christ is shown as the innocent victim who did not retaliate despite strong provocation, 1 Pet. 2. 21-23
Suffering injustice	1 Pet. 2. 19 1 Pet. 3. 14, 17	Christ's vicarious sacrifice is an example of suffering unjustly, 1 Pet. 2. 22-24; 3. 18

difficult for Christians to integrate into society. The Roman historian Suetonius tells us that during the reign of Nero, punishment was inflicted on the Christians, 'a class of men given to a new and mischievous superstition'.¹⁰ Consequently, at the same time as suspicion grew about the practice of Christianity and what it entailed, Christians felt more ostracized by society and developed a sense of alienation and isolation.¹¹ What Peter asks these communities to do in such circumstances is to accept the social structure of the time and be subject to its authority wherever possible without compromising their allegiance to Christ.¹²

This subjection or submission to authority is reflected in two ways in 1 Peter chapter 2 verse 13 to chapter 3 verse 9. First, to the state, and then, second, in the domestic realm or household. This teaching is predicated on the exhortations that Christians are called upon to act honourably so that God might be praised, 1 Pet. 2. 11, 12. Even though they are strangers in the world, they are not exempt from complying with the laws of the state. Peter deals with the interaction with the state and calls upon these Christian communities to acknowledge their authority, 2. 13-17; cp. Rom. 13. 1-8. In Romans chapter 13, Paul is much more concerned with God's establishment and commissioning of rulers primarily, but not exclusively, to provide protection for individuals, and to justify levying direct and indirect taxes, cp. Mark 12. 14-17. But the trajectory of thought in 1 Peter chapter 2 verses 13 to 17 seems to relate much more to the need of Christians to respond positively to the state because the state's role is to reward good behaviour and punish evil doers. By acting in an upright manner, and exercising their Christian freedom properly, they win approval. It was therefore necessary for Christians to be submissive to the state to show they were good citizens, but this was not a matter of assimilation but simply expressing their obedience to Christ.

Peter also identifies several household relationships, which include slaves and masters, 1 Pet. 2. 18, and wives

and husbands, 3. 1-7. This domestic context is somewhat different to that of Paul's use in Ephesians or Colossians. In both those letters, Paul uses the code with reciprocity as a requirement to ensure that the relationship works. For example, in Colossians, Paul refers to slaves obeying their earthly masters and, in turn, masters treating their slaves justly and fairly. Both are required to comply because of the higher duty they have to the Lord. Similarly, in the corresponding section in Ephesians, Paul refers to the responsibility of wives being subject to their (own) husbands, and, in turn, husbands loving their wives. Peter's approach is similar when it comes to husbands and wives but he seeks to widen his appeal. He not only includes the responsibilities of each party in a Christian marriage, but in the case of Christian women being married to pagan (unbelieving) husbands, they are expected to accept the authority of the husband as a way of witnessing to their faith, 3. 1, 2; cp. 1 Cor. 7. 13-16. Marshall suggests in this context that unlike Paul, who taught mainly slaves with Christian masters, Peter is concerned here with slaves working in the homes of pagan (unbelieving) masters.¹³ This, then, seems to fit in with the later context of Christian women and pagan (unbelieving) husbands. The real important issue here is that the individual should do good despite suffering unjustly, as this is highlighted and exemplified in the example of Christ Himself, 1 Pet. 2. 19-24.

Behaviour (manner of life)

One of the characteristic features of Jewish life was their laws of conduct, known as *Halachah*. These were rules taken from rabbinic literature that governed the daily conduct or walk of individuals and how they interacted within their communities. The concept is often used elsewhere in the New Testament in support of Christian conduct and is also clearly important to Peter as he lists several areas where right conduct is essential in support of Christian faith. We have already considered the 'household' code, 2. 12; 3. 1, 2 and 16, but three verses in chapter 1 epitomize Peter's approach in this immediate context. In 1 Peter chapter 1,

he demonstrates the important correlation between the holiness of God and Christian conduct, vv. 15, 16. In effect, the Christian is to bear the family likeness and live a life that is separate from sin. In other words, the reproduction of godliness must, of necessity, be an observed part of Christian experience despite living in a godless age. If, of course, that were true of Peter's society, it is just as applicable to us today. But this first imperative is underpinned by a second imperative, 1. 17, where Peter encourages Christians to live on earth as if their permanent home is elsewhere. This eschatological tension in the Christian's life ensures that the assimilating pressure from society at large is kept in right perspective.

1 Peter may be a very short letter, but it has a great deal to communicate on some very challenging issues, which will be dealt with in more depth in the coming articles.

Endnotes

- 1 S. MOYISE, *The Old Testament in the New Testament*, T&T Clarke, 2015, pp. 109-116; See 1. 16, 24, 25; 2. 6-8, 22; 3.10-12, 14; 4. 18; 5. 5
- 2 E. G. SELWYN, *The First Epistle of St Peter*, Macmillan, 1955, pg. 52.
- 3 See 1 Pet. 1. 6, 7; 2. 12, 19, 20; 3. 14, 16, 17; 4. 12-14, 16, 19; 5. 8-10.
- 4 A. F. WALLS and A. STIBBS, *1 Peter*, Tyndale, 1971, pg. 67.
- 5 E. G. SELWYN, *op. cit.*, pp. 57-58.
- 6 See for example Proverbs chapter 27 verse 21 (LXX), and the earlier mention in 1 Peter chapter 1 verse 7.
- 7 Notice the heavy reliance that Peter places upon Isaiah chapter 53 to explain the sacrificial work of Christ, 1 Pet. 2. 22-24.
- 8 Peter's frequent use of the Greek word for revelation in respect of the coming of Christ underlines the importance of this subject to a suffering group of people.
- 9 Luke 16. 13
- 10 Suetonius, *Nero 16 – The New Testament Background*, C. K. Barrett (Ed.), pg. 16.
- 11 'There was the general tendency to regard Christians as anti-social. Their avoidance of social activities, which involved idolatry and the like, was misinterpreted as due to "hatred of the human race". The disrupting effect of Christianity on family relationships, when some members of the family were believers and others were not increased the dislike, which was widely felt for Christians'. F. F. BRUCE, *Apostolic Defence of the Gospel*, pg. 54.
- 12 1 Pet. 2. 13 – 3. 9.
- 13 I. H. MARSHALL, *1 Peter*, IVP, pg. 87.

The Battle for the Mind

Part 2 A RENEWED MIND

By **MARK LACEY** Bath, England

'And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind', Rom. 12. 2.

In our previous study, we recognized the fact that we are engaged in a real battle for the mind. We saw something of the ways in which fear, doubt, and anxiety in the mind of a believer can overwhelm and potentially affect a testimony. Equally, we saw something of the ways in which God can take our weaknesses in this regard and turn them to His glory. The fact is that, in our weakness, His strength is made perfect as He ministers His grace to our lives, 2 Cor. 12. 9.

A set mind

As we commence this study, we do well to recall some of the plain teaching from the New Testament in relation to the mind. Remembering that the 'mind' is defined by W. E. VINE as 'the seat of reflective consciousness, comprising the faculties of perception and understanding', there are certain verses that deserve our reflection and that we need to apply to our perception and understanding of life in the 21st century.¹

Perhaps the clearest scripture of all in this regard is found in Colossians. It is rendered thus, 'Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth', Col. 3. 2 NKJV. Interestingly, this is a different word for 'mind' to the common *nous* in the Greek, as perhaps suggested by our KJV which renders the word 'affections'. It is certainly translated as 'mind' in many other cases, including 'let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus', Phil. 2. 5. In fact, we discover that the English words 'set your mind' are all caught up in this one Greek word *phroneō*. STRONG refers to it in terms of 'exercising the mind'.² So, we learn that there are things that can and should exercise our minds – things that are of God and from

above – and there are earthly things that ought not to entertain us as they so often do. Our challenge is how we make sure our focus is set on the right things. Thankfully, the word of God offers much to help us.

A prepared mind

Peter takes things a step further when he states unequivocally that we need to 'gird up the loins of . . . [our] mind', 1 Pet. 1. 13. To believers in the heat of the battle, he is saying that they need to be prepared and ready for the battle in which they find themselves. There is a third word here – *dianoia*. It represents the act of thinking something through, of meditation, possibly with a sense of moral purpose behind it. With Peter here, he is taken up with minds that are thinking over and reflecting upon the things of Christ, resting in peace upon Him and His grace, in hope of the prospect of His return. What a great occupation for the believer, but it takes preparation, work, exercise. If our minds are to be occupied with right things, then we are going to need to work at it, to discipline ourselves under the watchful eye of our God. Preparation is useless where it is haphazard and careless (back to Peter's battlefield analogy again). Instead, it needs to be purposeful, thoughtful, and careful, led and influenced by the work of the Spirit of God in our lives.

A firm mind

Paul also speaks to the Thessalonians and says, 'be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter', 2 Thess. 2. 2. There were all manner of pressures coming upon them physically, morally, and doctrinally, and Paul's earnest desire for them is that they will stand firm and not be thrown off course. Although they

were facing all manner of persecution in the early days of the church – and often more intense in the second Epistles – it was their minds that he was chiefly concerned about.

A renewed mind

This appears to be the crux of our consideration. The first two verses of Romans chapter 12 are amongst the most challenging in our Bible, and bear repeating in full:

'I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God', Rom. 12. 1, 2.

As far as the physical body is concerned, it is to be sacrificed to God in service – fully surrendered to Him, that we might be acceptable to Him. If that were not enough, our minds are to be renewed. We know how hard the former is to put into practice each day of our lives. We might not be surprised that the renewing of the mind is just as hard, but equally vital. The ultimate objective is that we might 'prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God'. We talk often, particularly amongst young believers, about the will of God. How can we know it? How can we live in it? Sometimes, we speak of it as something that we might just happen upon, or fall into, but it is not like that in reality. This verse highlights to us how hard it is. The *Collins Dictionary* has this to say of the word 'prove': 'If you prove that something is true, you show by means of argument or evidence that it is definitely true'.³ Any mathematician or scientist will tell us how hard it is to prove something – to gather sufficient argument or evidence to prove the case. In our case here, the challenge is the renewing of the mind, that we might demonstrate evidence of living in the will of God in our lives.

Again, we return to our Bible dictionary to help us with the

understanding of this word ‘renew’: ‘the adjustment of the moral and spiritual vision and thinking to the mind of God’, W. E. VINE.⁴ If we undertake a work of renewal or renovation in our home, we are looking to change things for the better, to make a real and noticeable difference for our own or others’ pleasure. This is what needs to happen in our minds if we are to live the lives that are going to bring glory to God. Paul uses similar language elsewhere of new believers whose lives have already been changed through faith in the Lord Jesus, ‘That ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; and be renewed in the spirit of your mind’, Eph. 4. 22, 23. It was still possible for them to be displaying the characteristics of the old man rather than the new man, whose characteristics are ‘righteousness and true holiness’, v. 24.

A conformed mind

If their minds were not transformed, then they must have been conformed. Whilst we would largely veer away from paraphrastic translations of the New Testament, J. B. PHILLIPS is particularly helpful here, as he renders this expression, ‘Don’t let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould’.⁵ Whether in cookery, art, engineering, or the like, a mould gives us a set shape to



conform to for reasons of uniformity. Our world is the same. It would have our minds occupied and shaped in particular ways and it definitely does not approve of a Christ-shaped mind – it wants us to conform to its licentious and immoral ways. WILLIAM MACDONALD captures it with beautiful simplicity in his commentary on this passage: ‘The world has its own politics, art, music, religion, amusements, thought patterns, and lifestyles, and it seeks to get everyone to conform to its culture and customs. It hates nonconformists – like Christ and his followers’.⁶

A transformed mind

This renewal then, requires an act of complete transformation. We love this word for ‘transform’ in the Greek because it is the word that gives us the scientific term for metamorphosis. Most will recall the primary school science lessons that taught us about the transformation of the somewhat bland and uninspiring caterpillar into the glorious butterfly, through the process of metamorphosis (although that was a hard word to say at age seven)! The shrieks of delight that are heard when the results of this real-life experiment turn into flight can still be heard across classrooms today.

Once again, as Paul comments on this in the verses preceding those quoted above in Ephesians chapter 4, he reflects on the wonder of the transformation that has turned the Christian from being like everyone else, to being, by God’s grace, something for His glory. Yet he emphasizes that this transformation is an on-going work in the mind for the remainder of our time in the world, until we reach the glory of heaven. ‘This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that ye henceforth walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind . . . be renewed in the spirit of your mind’, Eph. 4. 17, 23.

MATTHEW HENRY’s ancient, yet totally up-to-date commentary on this, is of great help here: ‘We receive from the Lord every day the fruits of his mercy. Let us render ourselves; all we are, all we have, all we can do: and after all, what return is it for such very rich receivings . . . The great enemy to this renewal is, conformity to this

world. Take heed of forming plans for happiness, as though it lay in the things of this world, which soon pass away. Do not fall in with the customs of those who walk in the lusts of the flesh, and mind earthly things’.⁷

A sacrificial mind

So, practically, where does this all start? Right back at the beginning of the Romans chapter 12 passage. Paul is beseeching, that is, imploring and urging these believers, that they might be prepared to be sacrificial. Not now the offering of a dead creature, as in Old Testament days, but rather presenting their whole selves, body and mind, alive to God. This is their reasonable, or rational, act of service. Spiritual logic determines that, because Christ offered himself, we too offer ourselves, and we cannot do that effectively with a mind that is far from what it should be.

AS JAMIESON, FAUSSET and BROWN put it: ‘The death of the one “Lamb of God, taking away the sin of the world,” has swept all dead victims from off the altar of God, to make room for the redeemed themselves as “living sacrifices” to Him who made “Him to be sin for us”’.⁸

The obligation to offer sacrifices to God has gone because of His one sacrifice for sins forever, Heb. 10. 12. However, our continual sacrifice now is to present our bodies, with renewed and not conformed minds, to Him, for His glory. May God grant us the strength and determination to overcome anything that would detract us from this purpose, that we might daily win this battle for the mind.

Endnotes

- 1 W. E. VINE, *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words*, Nelson.
- 2 J. STRONG, *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, Hendrickson.
- 3 W. COLLINS, *Collins English Dictionary*, Collins.
- 4 W. E. VINE, *op. cit.*
- 5 J. B. PHILLIPS, *New Testament in Modern English*, Collins.
- 6 W. MACDONALD, *Believer’s Bible Commentary*, Nelson.
- 7 M. HENRY, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Hendrickson.
- 8 JAMIESON, FAUSSET and BROWN, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Zondervan.

THE FATHER OF SPIRITS

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Materialism holds sway in our contemporary world. Most people live as if what is seen and touched is of ultimate value.¹ In contrast, the scriptures tell us that reality is composed of both material and spiritual things. Although the divine title 'the Father of spirits' only occurs once in the Bible, Heb. 12. 9, the concept permeates both Testaments. The Almighty is spiritual, and this determines our composition as His creatures: we are not merely material, we also have a spirit. As HENRY explains, 'See what man is; he is a spirit in flesh, a soul embodied, a creature wonderfully compounded of heaven and earth. See what God is; he is the God of the spirits of all mankind. He forms the spirit, Zech. 12. 1. He fathers it, Heb. 12. 9. He has an ability to fashion it, Ps. 33. 15, and authority to dispose of it, for he has said, All souls are mine, Ezek. 18. 4'.² GOODING agrees, saying that 'God is the author of the human spirit, and whether a man is converted or unconverted, as a human being he is a compound both of flesh on the one hand and spirit on the other. And the writer, talking to Christians, says we know him as a Father who educates and trains, and if need be chastens us, but since he is the Father of our spirit shall we not be subject to him?'³ Practically, this has great bearing on Christian living – especially regarding our worship and service. The designation 'Father of spirits' brings out a richness of our maker's power, knowledge, and intimacy with His people.⁴

Our Creator knows us

The title 'the Father of spirits' appears to indicate the same concept as the book of Numbers, 'the God of the spirits of all flesh', Num. 16. 22; 27. 16.⁵ It reveals the Almighty's work as humanity's Creator, as well as demonstrating His perfect knowledge of men's hearts. Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and their acolytes revolted against Israel's divinely ordained leadership. Despite the rebels' protest of unfairness, and the accusations that they levelled against Moses and Aaron, 'the Father of spirits' knew that their charges were specious. Rather than a moral revolution, this was a humanistic powerplay against divine authority. They slanderously attacked the existing order in a vain attempt to grasp the reins of leadership for themselves.

God's wrathful response, threatening to wipe the nation out, elicited a plea

for mercy from these godly men. They called on 'God' to spare the people and only judge the rebels.⁶ This intercession was reminiscent of Abraham's effort on behalf of the cities of the plain, rhetorically asking, 'Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?' Gen. 18. 25. Moses and Aaron knew that the Creator of our spirits knows what is in our minds and therefore judges discerningly.⁷ He perfectly distinguishes between the innocent and the guilty. As SPURGEON observes, 'We do but see the fair externals of things, but the great Father of spirits searches the hearts and tries the reins of the children of men, and judges after a higher standard'.⁸

Our Creator guides us

This title's second appearance is in Numbers chapter 27 verse 16, where Moses prayerfully links 'the God of the spirits of all flesh' with the

historic name 'the Lord', reminding the reader of His covenantal promises to Israel, Exod. 3. 14-18.¹⁰ He asks for a successor to lead the nation, and the Lord responds by appointing Joshua, who previously served as Moses' assistant, Num. 11. 28. For humans, choosing reliable leaders is fraught with uncertainty and often leads to disappointment – Saul is a notable example of this sort of unfaithful king. But God knows human hearts and what they will do in the future; accordingly, He could be trusted to choose the best shepherd for Israel. The conquest generation could go into the Land confiding in Him and His wise selection of the commanding general. Even in our age, we must look to the Lord to raise up the right leaders in the local church.¹⁰ In personal decisions, believers may also safely ask Him to guide and provide for us, as a well-known poem avers,

'He knows, He loves, He cares,
nothing this truth can dim.
He gives His very best to those
who leave the choice with Him'.¹¹

Where the spiritual meets the physical

The conflict between God's way and man's regarding the spiritual and the material looms large in the book of Hebrews. It seems that Jews of that day were throwing the physical nature of Judaism in the face of Hebrew-background believers. One can imagine them saying, 'We have a physical temple in Jerusalem with a physical high priest, and tangible sacrifices. What do you Christians have?'. The answers to these challenges can be found in the 'better' things found in Christianity, which Hebrews unpacks. Christians have a Saviour who is better than angels, ch. 1. He is a better leader than Moses or Joshua, Heb. 3. 4; a better high priest with a better covenant which has better promises, chh. 7, 8. His sacrifice is better in quality and extent, and only needed to be offered once for all, chh. 9, 10. In Christ, the physical types and shadows give way to spiritual and eternal realities. Maturity and completion is provided in place of the transitory and earthly.

After discussing the Jewish-Christian divide, Hebrews chapter 12 presents

the confluence of mankind's spiritual and material aspects. Human beings are spiritual and material, and this has a direct bearing on God's parental training of His people. The passage argues that if we respected and heeded our earthly fathers, then how much more ought we to obey our Father in heaven who is the Creator and sustainer of our physical and spiritual life. He knows our entire being – internally and externally; therefore, He trains us perfectly – even employing life's trials for our sanctification. MORRIS elucidates this principle, 'When people subject themselves to God, accepting life's sufferings as discipline from his fatherly hand, they enter the life that is alone worthy of the name'.¹²

Our true spiritual parentage is indicated by our response to His revelation through His Son. As the Lord Jesus explained, 'If God were your Father, you would love Me, for I proceeded forth and came from God; nor have I come of Myself, but He

sent Me. Why do you not understand My speech? Because you are not able to listen to My word. You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it. But because I tell the truth, you do not believe Me. Which of you convicts Me of sin? And if I tell the truth, why do you not believe Me? He who is of God hears God's words; therefore you do not hear, because you are not of God', John 8. 42-47 NKJV. As His children, we should submit to 'The Father of spirits'. His disciplinary work develops the abundant life that He promised, John 10. 10, and we can trust Him to do what is best for us. We worship Him 'in spirit and in truth', 4. 24, and His Spirit intercedes for us, teaches us, and conforms us to His image, Rom. 8. 26-30; 1 Cor. 2. 10-16. At His coming, we will be glorified body, soul, and spirit, 1 Thess. 5. 23.



Endnotes

- 1 A noted scientist comments on the naturalistic assumptions of scientific materialism and how the fact of 'information' refutes them, 'information is coming to play a central role in the understanding of nature, and information is not material, even though it is usually carried on a material substrate. Information is not therefore reducible to matter, and some physicists even suggest that information is primary and matter secondary . . . This notion converges with the biblical claim that God the Word is primary and matter is secondary, John 1. 1-3 . . . Indeed, according to the biblical world-view, not only is mind not the same as brain, mind actually is the primary "stuff" of the universe. For the eternal Word who is God is spirit and not material at all, John 4. 24'. JOHN LENNOX, *Against the Flow*, Monarch, 2015, pg. 343.
- 2 MATTHEW HENRY, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Hendrickson, 1994, pg. 210. Italics original.
- 3 DAVID GOODING, *Three Creation Stories and Three Patriarchs. Eight Studies on Understanding the Major Sections of Genesis*, Myrtlefield Sermons, Myrtlefield Trust, 2019, pp. 36, 37.
- 4 F. F. BRUCE contends that in Hebrews chapter 12 verse 9 it ought to be translated 'the Father of our spirits'; the margins of the Revised Version of 1881 and the American Standard Version also have this translation. This indicates that Hebrews is particularly emphasizing our Maker's close connection with humanity. 'God, as a spirit, is infinitely more excellent than all material beings, and all created spirits. Their perfections are derived from him . . . Hence it is said of him, that "he only hath immortality", 1 Tim. 6. 16. He is an infinite spirit; and it can be said of none but him, that "his understanding is infinite", Ps. 147. 5'. THOMAS BOSTON, *Works, Vol. 1*, George and Robert King, 1848, pg. 78. 'As such He has at heart our highest spiritual welfare. "By these things men live, and wholly therein is the life of our spirit", Is. 38. 16, R.V., with Deut. 8. 3'. W. E. VINE, *Collected Writings: Hebrews*, Thomas Nelson, 1996, n/a.
- 5 Similar divine titles were used in ancient apocryphal Jewish literature; for example, 'the Lord of the spirits', 1 Enoch 37. 2; 2 Maccabees 3. 24. It is possible that the title points to God's creation of all spiritual beings – angels and humans included.
- 6 *Elohim* – the creator.
- 7 1 Sam. 16. 7; Prov. 15. 11; Heb. 4. 13.
- 8 C. H. SPURGEON, *Metropolitan Tabernacle*, Vol. 28, pg. 25.
- 9 Transliterated as Jehovah / Yahweh / YHWH.
- 10 Acts 20. 28; 1 Tim. 3; Titus 1.
- 11 From the poem, 'The Weaver', attributed to FLORENCE M. ALT or GRANT COLFAX TULLAR.
- 12 LEON MORRIS, 'Hebrews', in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Hebrews through Revelation*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, Vol. 12. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981, pg. 137.



LORD'S WORK TRUST

STRIVING TOGETHER FOR THE GOSPEL

By **LEONARD CURRIE**

From the moment of his conversion, Paul had a deep love for the gospel. He understood that preaching was central in spearheading the work of the gospel. He further appreciated that prayer was crucial in strengthening such a work for God. However, he was also aware that providing for such activity was critical in supporting the advancement of the gospel and the work of the Lord. The apostle will summarize this in the first chapter of Philippians, when he talks about 'Striving together for the faith ["furtherance", v. 12, and "fellowship", v. 5] of the gospel', v. 27.

Historically

John Ritchie was a man who similarly had a deep interest in the spread of the gospel and all aspects of helping believers develop spiritually. In 1891, he started the publication of a small monthly magazine called the *Believer's Magazine* in Kilmarnock, Scotland. With the Lord's help, the magazine continues to be published monthly. From the outset, news items of missionary activity and the significant progress of the Lord's work in almost every corner of the world were included each month. These reports were very encouraging and stimulated prayerful interest. They also exercised some believers to send funds to help practically in the ongoing development of the work. From these small beginnings, the Lord's Work Trust was established.

Practically

One of the key functions of the Trust is to act as a conduit to pass on funds from assemblies and individuals to assembly-based workers and related projects. The significant experience acquired over many years enables the Trust to do this very efficiently and effectively, especially in some of the more challenging geographies in the world. As an example, during Covid, financial support was sent to the struggling believers in Sri Lanka,

who had no government support. Funds left the Trust on a Friday, enabling special dispensation to be given to buy goods wholesale in Sri Lanka on the Saturday and be stored in the Gospel Hall in Colombo. After the meetings on Sunday, the supplies were loaded onto a truck for transportation and distribution 200 miles away on the east coast of the Island on the Monday, an eight-hour journey. As a result, the specific practical needs of the hungry believers were satisfied in a very timely manner. It also enabled the work of the Lord to continue to flourish spiritually due to the kindness of the Lord's people.

Another activity of the Trust is to communicate regularly with those receiving funds so that we can seek to encourage them, and also receive updates on the work that they are involved in. These reports then form part of a monthly newsletter, *Look on the Fields*, that is published and distributed freely by the Trust. A different report is included for each day of the month, to further encourage a regular prayerful interest in the Lord's work and workers at home and abroad. *Look on the Fields* can be accessed as a flipbook via our website, www.lordsworktrust-kilmarnock.co.uk.

Numerically

During the last year, over £9 million pounds passed through the Trust to the work of the Lord. These funds were transmitted to over 1,200 servants, assemblies, or projects in almost ninety different countries. Importantly, all gifts were forwarded without any deduction for expenses. In addition, since the Trust is a registered charity, we are able to use Gift Aid, a government established mechanism in the UK to reclaim tax. So, for any donor who ordinarily pays tax (including pensioners), their gift can be increased by at least 25%. This makes a material difference to the help that can be provided at home or abroad. No expenses are deducted from reclaimed tax via Gift Aid either.

Some of the funds received are from legacies. The Trust also has extensive experience in carefully and sensitively handling assets and estates left by believers on their home call.

Literarily

The Lord's Work Trust owns the publishing business, John Ritchie Limited. It publishes many titles each year with the express aim of communicating the truth of God in a way that will strengthen and upbuild the Lord's people and local assembly testimony. During the last year we were also given the opportunity to take on responsibility for the reprinting and distribution of titles formerly published by Gospel Tract Publications.

Through this relationship with John Ritchie Limited, the Trust is able to make available Bibles, tracts, and other helpful literature for the furtherance of the work of God, especially in underprivileged parts of the world. We also support the translation and publication of Christian literature in other languages across the globe.

Finally

It is an immense privilege for all of us to play a small part in this work of the Lord. Hopefully this very brief overview gives you some insight into aspects of the Lord's Work Trust. If you require any further information, please contact the Secretary, Lord's Work Trust, 42 Beansburn, Kilmarnock, KA3 1RL (email: l.currie@lwtrust.co.uk or telephone 01563 521098).



Edited by
ANDREW DUTTON

YOUNG PRECIOUS SEED

is a supplement of *Precious Seed*, designed for those young in the faith. Its purpose is to restate timeless truths from the word of God for a new generation of Christians and to kindle a biblical approach to current issues in the world in which we live. YPS is published by *Precious Seed*, PO Box 10544, Grantham, NG31 0HW, UK, and is available separately from the main magazine.

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YOUNG.PRECIOUSSEED

Editor's Introduction

Welcome to the August issue of YPS.

Now well into the summer season, perhaps you have already had the opportunity to take part in or support special outreach

activities. It is great to use the extra time available during the holiday periods to serve the Lord or simply enjoy the company of other Christians. If you are at a 'loose end', why not find out if there are opportunities near you for Christian service?

This issue has more interesting and helpful articles and I hope you enjoy reading the magazine and trust that the articles will be a blessing to you.

Andrew Dutton

Fascinating Facts – Evidence from nature of a Creator's touch

PHIL ARMSTRONG, LIVERPOOL, ENGLAND



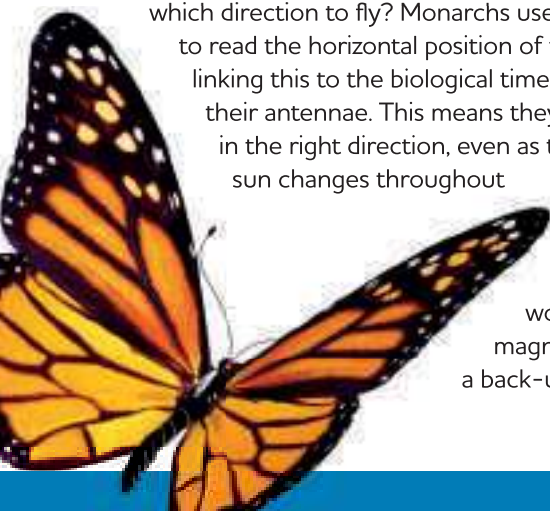
Monarch migration

Every spring, 100-200 million Monarch butterflies begin their epic migration from Mexico, flying northwards to the United States and Canada, before returning again to Mexico for the winter. With a total distance of around 5,000 miles, the Monarch butterfly is the only type of insect that does anything like this. Their feat of endurance and navigation points to the power of our Creator God. But the most amazing thing about this journey is that the butterflies that return home for the winter are not the same ones that left Mexico in the spring. The total migration is like a relay, where several generations of butterflies complete their part of the trip in their short lifetime. The butterflies that return south to Mexico for the winter are at least the great-great-grandchildren of those that set off back in the spring. This means that the navigation information they need to complete their part of the larger journey is already programmed into their DNA. Each new generation needs to know instinctively how to continue the migration.

final generation of butterflies that complete the return journey have their compasses flipped, so that they instinctively fly in the opposite direction, back down to Mexico.

While it takes several generations to complete the journey north, a single 'super generation' of butterflies will do the whole return journey in one go. They developed from a special generation of eggs and have become very different from their parents. Their bodies make less of one special hormone chemical, which basically stops them ageing, and so they can fly all the way back to Mexico, often to the same tree that their great-great-grandparents left from! I hope you agree with me that this multi-generational migration, with amazing navigation skill, is too complex to happen by chance, but instead shows purposeful design. Our God has programmed this behaviour into the delicate Monarch butterfly. He alone deserves our recognition and our praise.

So how does each new generation of butterflies know in which direction to fly? Monarchs use a 'sun compass' to read the horizontal position of the sun, while linking this to the biological time clock built into their antennae. This means they can keep flying in the right direction, even as the position of the sun changes throughout the day. When the sky is too cloudy for the sun compass to work, they have a magnetic compass as a back-up. Somehow, the



Sources

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ERIC CASSELL, *Animal Algorithms*, Discovery Institute, 2021.

Christian Basics – Daily Prayer

BY ANDREW DUTTON, NORWICH, ENGLAND

‘Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation’, Matt. 26. 41.

In the last issue we looked at the importance of daily Bible reading, and one of the suggestions was to accompany Bible reading with prayer. The two activities are linked and are vital for every believer in the Lord Jesus. Yet prayer can be very difficult – I have not yet come across a Christian who finds prayer easy, or who claims to pray enough!

Daily prayer is essential for Christians – it is our communication with God. There are many examples of how people pray in the Bible, and I have recently enjoyed looking through the prayers of the Apostle Paul. One example is in Ephesians chapter 3 verses 14 to 19. As he prays for the Ephesian believers, we can notice how he prays and what he prays for:

- ‘I bow my knees’, v. 14. There is an attitude of reverence and worship, as Paul speaks to the ‘Father of our Lord Jesus Christ’.
- In his prayer, Paul appreciates ‘the riches of his glory’, v.16.
- Paul asks for the Christians:
 - to ‘be strengthened with might’ (power), v. 16.
 - ‘that Christ may dwell in . . . [their] hearts by faith’, v. 17.
 - to ‘be able to comprehend’, v. 18, the immeasurable fullness of God.
 - to ‘know the love of Christ’, v. 19.

These are great themes that we can incorporate into our prayers for ourselves and others.

Whilst personal prayer is essential for Christian living, there are pressures on time that make this difficult. Some pressures are genuine priorities, but there may be other calls on time that could be adjusted to accommodate or increase daily prayer.

If a daily prayer time is not part of your schedule, or you want to pray more, the following hints may help (there are a few similar points to our last article on daily Bible reading!):

- Commit to God to be serious about daily prayer and ask for His help in making changes to your life to accommodate this.
- Find a time that works for you, ideally when you are least likely to be distracted. A routine is good because it helps you carry on with a prayer time even if you do not feel like it.

- Consciously remove distractions; it might help to leave your phone or tablet in another room!
- Allocate realistic amounts of time at first; it might be easier to start with shorter prayer times that can be gradually increased.
- Always start with thanking God and finding some aspect of the Lord Jesus that you can appreciate in your prayer. If you have just read a portion of the Bible, there may be something fresh or new to bring to God.
- It is important to be open with God and confess sin.
- Bring requests to God. This could include a variety of things, from asking for help ahead of a difficult day, praying for the needs of sick believers and friends, to asking for the salvation of people you know.
- Remember when praying for other Christians that subjects can go beyond practical and health needs! Paul prayed for the Philippian believers that their ‘love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment; that . . . [they] may be sincere and without offence till the day of Christ’, Phil. 1. 9, 10. We need to pray more for each other’s spiritual wellbeing.
- Consider using a prayer list or writing items down; some Christians find it helpful to keep a prayer diary and note how God answers prayers.
- In addition to specially set aside prayer times, recognize that we can speak to God at any time or in any place!



Soul-Searching Scriptures

BY ADRIAN FERGUSON, PERTH, SCOTLAND

'For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end', Jer. 29. 11

A few years ago, this text from Jeremiah chapter 29 verse 11 seemed to be quoted everywhere! It had almost become a cliché as it was so widely referenced! Yet long before this verse was popularized in cards and posters, it had been a verse that had spoken to my soul – and has remained a comfort in the most trying times of life.

In 1994, I had the joy of marrying my childhood sweetheart, Audrey. Like many newlyweds, we had exciting plans and endless energy. We loved the Lord, and loved the local assembly, and all of its activities. We enjoyed holidays, making new friends, and welcoming people into our home for fellowship. But in January 1997, suddenly and unexpectedly, we entered into a deep trial which has left its own refining mark on our lives.

Almost overnight Audrey went from being fit and healthy to being critically ill. This sudden decline coincided exactly with the news that she was pregnant with our first child. Various medical tests were taken, and the devastating news came back that Audrey had a 'one-in-a-million' disease. This disease was incurable, and it had a life expectancy of only five years! After further surgical procedures, Audrey went into premature labour and Anna, our only child, was born. Anna only lived eight days – we were devastated. Yet the scriptures came with clarity and comfort, including Jeremiah chapter 29 verse 11. God still had a work to do in us and through us. With God's help we were able to get going again in service for the Lord. Remarkably, even during our grief, the Lord opened a new door of opportunity to serve amongst children and teenagers, particularly in regular camps. It became a very fruitful and happy mission field for nearly twenty years.

In 2008, Audrey's health had deteriorated to such a level that her only hope of survival was to receive a lung transplant. During the period of waiting for the transplant, we received eight false alarms, yet, every time, we read it, or someone passed on the scripture to us: Jer. 29. 11. Eventually, in August 2008, Audrey received the transplant, but immediately it began to fail. In the most remarkable night of prayer that I have ever experienced, a dear servant of the Lord, Jim McMaster, brought Audrey before the Lord. When the surgeon looked for an answer in the gloom, God was already guiding his hand, and wonderfully Audrey lived! That evening Jeremiah chapter 29 verse 11 was again confirmed.

Months later, after another experience of God's goodness, we did not hear our verse of confirmation. We were puzzled, why is God silent? I was tidying my filing cabinet and a long-forgotten card from my mother fell out. Enclosed in the card was the text, Jer. 29. 11. The confirmation came again – God always keeps His promises! In the goodness of God, Audrey has lived a further sixteen years, and we have been able to continue to serve the Lord together. God has blessed us in so many ways.

God's thoughts and plans are not always exactly as we want them, but they are exactly as we need them! Our God keeps the planets in orbit and our breath in His hand. He knows exactly what plans are right for us. The hymn writer penned his understanding of God's plans,

'I know who holds the future, and He'll guide me with His hand.

With God things don't just happen; everything by Him is planned.

So as I face tomorrow, with its problems large and small, I'll trust the God of miracles, give to Him my all'.¹

God is always in full control.

¹ Hymn written by Alfred B. Smith and Eugene Clarke.



Saints' CVs: John Bunyan

BY JEREMY SINGER, BRIDGE OF WEIR, SCOTLAND

JOHN BUNYAN 1628-1688

One Saturday evening shortly after I had passed my driving test, I set out in my car heading to Peterborough to attend a Bible study. Sadly, I got completely disorientated and arrived in Bedford, some forty miles away from my intended destination. But all was not lost! I spent a pleasant evening looking around and discovering several landmarks celebrating Bedford's most famous son, John Bunyan.

Bunyan was a massively influential Christian author from the 17th century, whose works include *The Pilgrim's Progress*, *The Holy War*, and his autobiographical *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*. For 350 years, his books have been best-sellers. In particular, *The Pilgrim's Progress* has never been out of print.¹ Remarkably, Bunyan was self-taught. He was a tinker by trade, repairing pots and pans in villages around Bedfordshire. At a time when religious scholars invariably attended Oxford or Cambridge Universities, Bunyan received little formal education.

Bunyan relates his conversion experience in his autobiography.² He describes meeting 'three or four poor women sitting at a door, in the sun, talking about the things of God . . . their talk was about a new birth, the work of God on their hearts . . . how God had visited their souls with His love in the Lord Jesus'. He explains how their joy and understanding of scripture led him to conviction. He remembers the expression from the parable, 'Yet there is room', Luke 14. 22, as 'Sweet words to me; for truly I thought that by them I saw there was place enough in heaven for me; and moreover, that when the Lord Jesus did speak these words, He then did think of me'.

Bunyan's salvation story echoes that of his fictional pilgrim who walked to Calvary to have his weight of guilt removed. These are the most famous of Bunyan's poetic lines,³

'Thus far did I come laden with my sin;
Nor could aught ease the grief that I was in,
Till I came hither: what a place is this!
Must here be the beginning of my bliss?
Must here the burden fall from off my back?
Must here the strings that bound it to me crack?
Blest cross! blest sepulchre! blest rather be
The Man that was there put to shame for me!'

His unorthodox style and outspoken manner earned him a lifetime of persecution from the authorities. He was



several years in Bedford prison. From this dismal location, he gained inspiration for some of his most beautiful allegorical writing.

At the age of fifty-nine, Bunyan died. He anticipated his entrance to glory, again via the fictional experience of two of his pilgrim characters, Christian and Hopeful, as they reached the celestial city.⁴

'Now I saw in my dream that these two men went in at the gate: and lo, as they entered, they were transfigured, and they had raiment put on that shone like gold. There was also that met them with harps and crowns, and gave them to them – the harps to praise withal, and the crowns in token of honour. Then I heard in my dream that all the bells in the city rang again for joy, and that it was said unto them, "Enter ye into the joy of your Lord".'

John Bunyan left a rich legacy of illustrative truth. *The Holy War* refers to eye gate and ear gate as entrances to the city of Mansoul; you may still hear preachers talking about these portals today. Bunyan's most famous work is *The Pilgrim's Progress*, particularly the first part that narrates the journey of Christian from the city of destruction to the celestial city. Many adaptations have been undertaken by modern writers including Enid Blyton⁵ and C. S. Lewis.⁶

A bronze statue of John Bunyan was placed in Bedford in 1874. At the statue's unveiling, the Dean of Westminster declared,⁷ 'Every one of you who has not read *The Pilgrim's Progress*, if there be any such person, read it without delay: those who have read it a hundred times, read it for the hundred and first time. Follow out in your lives the lesson which *The Pilgrim's Progress* teaches, and then you will all of you be even better monuments of John Bunyan than this magnificent statue'.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/sep/23/100-best-novels-pilgrims-progress>.

² JOHN BUNYAN, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*. Found here: <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/654>.

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⁴ *Ibid*.

⁵ ENID BLYTON, *The Land of Far Beyond*, Methuen, 1942.

⁶ C. S. LEWIS, *The Pilgrim's Regress*, Dent, 1933.

⁷ *The Book of the Bunyan Festival, 1874*. Reprinted. ISBN 978-3-38250-653-7

POURED OUT

By **DAVID BRAUCH** Wauwatosa, USA

What was the overwhelming reaction of the United States to the attack by Japanese fighter planes on the naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii on 7 December 1941, which took the lives of some 2,400 United States personnel, and the destruction of its Pacific fleet of naval ships? It could be described as an outpouring of anger and it caused the United States government to declare war on Japan shortly afterward. Contrast this phrase 'poured-out', meaning 'gushed forth', with others such as 'dribbled out' or 'trickled forth'. The focus of this article is on the frequent scriptural references to 'poured out' as attributed to the Godhead.

Initially, consider its use as describing the pouring out of something physical. Amos states, 'Seek him that maketh the seven stars and Orion, and turneth the shadow of death into the morning, and maketh the day dark with night: that calleth for the waters of the sea, and **poureth them out** upon the face of the earth: The Lord is his name', 5. 8. Early in the Lord's public ministry, it says, 'And when he had made a scourge of small cords, he drove them all out of the temple, and the sheep, and the oxen; and **poured out** the changers' money, and overthrew the tables', John 2. 15.

Sometimes this couplet occurs when we read that God got angry with the sins of mankind to the point of manifesting His wrath. As an example, Jeremiah chapter 42 verse 18 reads, 'For thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel; As mine anger and my fury hath been poured forth upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem; so shall my fury be **poured forth** upon you, when ye shall enter into Egypt: and ye shall be an execration, and an astonishment, and a curse, and a reproach; and ye shall see this place no more'.

Yet at other times, the 'pouring-out' relates to the Godhead manifesting mercy and graciously bestowing divine favour on certain humans. It is related to God giving the Holy Spirit to a person or group of people when they repent and seek after Him. Ezekiel chapter 39 verse 29 states, 'Neither will I hide my face any more

from them: for I have **poured out** my spirit upon the house of Israel, saith the Lord God'.

Last, there are two references found in the Old Testament which relate to our Lord Jesus being 'poured out' during His time on earth. The first is found in Psalm 22 verse 14 which reads, 'I am poured out like water'. This verse suggests that someone was acting upon our Lord, in contrast to He Himself taking the initiative. This pouring-out seems to be done to, not by Him. GILL suggests 'This may refer to Christ's sweat in the garden, when through his agony or conflict with Satan, and his vehemency in prayer,



and the pressure on his mind, in view of his people's sins, and the wrath of God for them, and the accursed death he was about to undergo on that account, sweat in great abundance came from all parts of his body, and not only stood in large drops, but fell to the ground like great drops of blood'.¹ Hebrews chapter 5 verse 7 seems to confirm GILL's conclusion.

The second Old Testament verse that mentions our Lord being 'poured out' is found in Isaiah chapter 53 verse 12, with God the Father speaking, 'Therefore will I divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil [plunder] with the strong; because he hath **poured out** his soul unto death'. This verse reads as though Christ Himself is initiating this action/response. Although our Saviour's 'pouring out unto death' was the predetermined plan of the Father, Acts 2. 23; 4. 28, the Saviour submitted Himself willingly and entirely voluntarily. It is interesting to note that in the Hebrew language, the verbs used in verse 12, 'poured out', 'numbered', and 'bore' are all in the perfect tense, expressing completed action. However, the fourth verb 'interceded' is in the imperfect tense, indicating on-going activity.

GUZIK writes that, 'This speaks of the totality of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. "Poured out" means that it was all gone. There was nothing left, nothing more He could give'.² SPURGEON states that 'you see how complete it was. Jesus gave poor sinners everything. His every faculty was laid out for them. To his last rag he was stripped upon the cross. No part of his body or of his soul was kept back from being made a sacrifice. The last drop, as I said before, was poured out until the cup was drained. He made no reserve: he kept not back even his innermost self: "He hath poured out his soul unto death"'.³

Endnotes

- 1 JOHN GILL, *Exposition of the Old and New Testaments*, e-Sword resource.
- 2 DAVID GUZIK, *Commentary on the whole Bible*, e-Sword resource.
- 3 C. H. SPURGEON, 'Christ's Connection with Sinners the Source of His Glory', *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Volume 35*, Banner of Truth Trust, 1991.

NEHEMIAH

Part 2 **A man of prayer**

By **TOM MERRIMAN** Tenby, Wales

Nehemiah's book is punctuated by prayer.

Prioritizing the things of God, it was his recourse in all kinds of situations.¹ Prayer was a major exercise of Nehemiah for the four months from chapter 1 verse 1, 'the month Chisleu', to chapter 2 verse 1, 'the month Nisan'. He was burdened by the desperate circumstances of the people of God and the conditions of the place where He had placed His name, Jerusalem. His prayers would have developed during this period as he sought to understand the Lord's purpose and recognize the role that he was intended to fulfil. This prayer of faith is the culmination as he anticipated an opportunity for a significant development that lay before him – 'prosper, I pray thee, thy servant this day, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man. For I was the king's cupbearer', v. 11.

The spirit and the structure of Nehemiah's prayer are instructive for saints today, as we endeavour to '[continue] steadfastly in prayer', Rom. 12. 12 NKJV.

Reverence, v. 5

The opening expression demonstrates appropriate submission and respect – 'I beseech thee, O Lord [*Jehovah*] God of heaven'. Nehemiah was aware that he bowed at the footstool of earth, and his request was ascending to the self-existent, self-dependent God, who cannot be contained by even the heaven of heavens.² He acknowledged the magnitude of God's power, 'the great and terrible God'; fearsome indeed to His enemies, but awe-inspiring to them that are His. Nehemiah was conscious of Israel's failure but was assured of God's faithfulness to His promises – 'that keepeth covenant and mercy for them that love him

and observe his commandments'. He recognized that love and obedience were key to drawing on God's pity.

The pattern prayer Jesus taught His disciples shows that it is fitting to approach God with reverence. It begins, 'Our Father, which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name', Matt. 6. 9. However, our Lord conferred on us the privilege of approaching in His name. Our Father delights to glorify His Son by answering prayers that are offered in this way, John 14. 13, 14. What power is at our disposal, through the indwelling Spirit, when our desires are aligned with His! God 'is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us', Eph. 3. 20. Pity is also plenteous for those who, acknowledging the greatness of God, approach Him in a becoming manner. Psalm 103 verse 11 reads, 'as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is his mercy toward them that fear him'. The higher we recognize Him to be, the further we appreciate our Lord descended to reach us. Praise God that His immense holiness is matched by His great compassion! Since Jesus, the Son of God has 'passed into the heavens', by His high-priestly service, we are now encouraged to 'come boldly unto the throne of grace'. There we can readily 'obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need', Heb. 4. 14, 16.

Reverence should move us to obedience. Whilst it is the Lord's prerogative to bless, a spirit submissive to His will and corresponding behaviour is conducive to answered prayer, 'whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight', 1 John 3. 22.

Repentance, vv. 6, 7

Nehemiah called on God to witness that he was in earnest by the continuity of his prayers that were offered 'day and night'. The repetition of the word 'now' conveys his sense of urgency, 'Let thine ear now be attentive, and thine eyes open, that thou mayest hear the prayer . . . which I pray before thee now'.

Israel were God's servants, but they had not fulfilled their duty. Nehemiah confessed that they had departed from His standards, acknowledging whom they had offended, 'we have sinned against thee'.³ Nehemiah was not personally responsible for leading the nation into sin, but he identified himself with their failure, 'both I and my father's house have sinned'.

He also recognized the severity of their position, 'We have dealt very corruptly against thee', and confessed the many ways they had broken the covenant, referring to 'commandments . . . statutes' and 'judgments' they had not kept. Commandments refer to explicit instructions that had been given; amongst others, such precepts are found in Exodus chapter 20. Statutes were practices they were responsible for observing – prescribed duties, including those that pertained to God's dwelling place. Exodus chapter 21 commences, 'Now these are the judgments', establishing principles by which a correct course of action might be discerned. One such principle was raised by Paul, 'it is written in the law of Moses, Thou shalt not muzzle the mouth of the ox that treadeth out the corn', 1 Cor. 9. 9. He explained that it was not just about cattle but was written to teach that work should be rewarded.⁴

Whilst the behaviour of a former generation may bring consequences for those that follow, Ezekiel chapter 18 shows each to be answerable for their own sin and not another's.⁵ The kings of Judah and Israel were held to the divine standard, and a blot was recorded against those that continued in the sins of their fathers.⁶ We are not accountable for inherited conditions, but

we are responsible for our own adherence to God's word. In the New Testament, we find precepts, practices and principles that should govern personal and assembly life. Our desire should be to follow them, for Jesus said, 'If ye love me, keep my commandments', John 14. 15. If we discover that we have departed from them, it is proper to address these sincerely in the presence of God, repenting and returning to His ways.

Remembrance, vv. 8, 9

Since the nation had rebelled against God, the people's sad circumstances, and those of the land, were to be expected, according to the word of the Lord. In Leviticus chapter 26, He had said, 'if ye walk contrary unto me, and will not hearken unto me . . . I will bring the land into desolation . . . I will scatter you among the heathen', vv. 21-33; see also Deut. 28. 64. Aware that the Lord had been faithful to His word, Nehemiah also knew that, in keeping with His unchanging character, the Lord was ready to fulfil its counterpart, 'If they shall confess . . . then will I remember my covenant', Lev. 26. 40, 42; I 'will turn thy captivity', Deut. 30. 3. He may have been familiar with these scriptures, but by personal, prayerful remembrance of them over these months, the path to restoration was apparent. So, having confessed Israel's sin, Nehemiah remembered

God's word before Him, confident that His request was according to the will of God, cp. Exod. 32. 13.

It is important to give attention to scripture at all times, whether good or bad. Though we may have read them before, doing so again in different circumstances offers new perspective. The Lord will give fresh understanding and set out the course ahead. This is in keeping with Psalm 119 verse 105, 'Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path'. As we learn the will of God and seek to fulfil His desire, we too may ask Him to fulfil His word. Knowing that our petition is according to the word of God will give us confidence in His presence.

Request, vv. 10, 11

As Nehemiah began to frame his request, a common thread can be seen running through verse 10 that shows He sought the will of the Lord. Five times over, the words 'thy' and 'thou' occur – 'these are thy servants and thy people, whom thou hast redeemed by thy great power, and by thy strong hand'. God had not abandoned the people whom He had redeemed, and with whom He had entered into covenant relationship. His desire was to regather them and restore them to the land. Nehemiah concluded with a specific request in view of an opportunity he anticipated. He hoped to be released

from his responsibility as the king's cupbearer to further the work of the Lord in Jerusalem. Standing before the king in Nehemiah chapter 2, he would use deferential language, 'Let the king live for ever', v. 3, but in prayer, he recognized that in God's sight, the king was just a 'man'. Addressing God as 'Lord [āḏōnāy]', he sought the Lord's sovereign power to move the heart of the king. After all, 'The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will', Prov. 21. 1.

Bought with the precious blood of God's own Son, we are His by redemptive right. Indwelt by the Spirit of God, our body is His temple, and we are enjoined to render to Him what is His, 'ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit', 1 Cor. 6. 20.

Following the example of Nehemiah, may we endeavour to lay hold on the Lord desiring to understand His will, and seek opportunities to bring honour to His name, and for the furtherance of the Lord's work. Depending on the Lord for blessing, we may share the experience of Jacob. Clinging to the Lord for blessing, his name was changed to Israel, 'for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed', Gen 32. 28.

Let us therefore be people with an exercise for prayer, making it our recourse in all situations of life, being 'careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let . . . [our] requests be made known unto God', Phil. 4. 6.



Endnotes

- 1 Nehemiah's personal prayers include: Neh. 1. 4-11; 2. 4; 4. 4, 5; 5. 19; 6. 9, 14; 13. 14, 22, 29, 31. Corporate prayers also occur.
- 2 Isa. 66. 1; 1 Kgs. 8. 27.
- 3 Joseph and David also recognized whom sin offends, Gen. 39. 9; Ps. 51. 4.
- 4 See also: Deut. 25. 4; 1 Tim. 5. 18.
- 5 Cp. Exod. 34. 7.
- 6 For example, 1 Kgs. 15. 3, 26.

LETTER TO PHILEMON

Part 1

By **JOHN SCARBROOK** Killamarsh, England

Christianity is the very antithesis of slavery. In the first century, when this brief letter was written, slavery was endemic throughout the Roman empire. It has been suggested that as many as one third of the population under Rome's authority were slaves. Their individual experience varied widely. For those with caring and benevolent masters, life could be tolerable. A slave, however, remained the property of the one who had paid the purchase price, usually from a defeated and subjugated people, and many were used, misused, or disposed of at the whim of the owner. To be a slave meant loss of freedom, loss of possessions, loss of dignity and loss of any self-worth.

It was men and women of Christian faith and conviction who formed the vanguard of opposition to slavery both in principle and practice, leading to the 1807 and 1834 Abolition of Slavery laws within the British Empire. These were followed by the thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution in 1865 which outlawed slavery and set free more than 100,000 enslaved people across the country. Sadly, however, it took four years of civil war in which over 600,000 lost their lives, to achieve a satisfactory amendment.

The Letter to Philemon is written against the background of events in a first century home in Colossae, a town in Asia Minor, now modern-day Turkey. It is remarkable evidence of both the inspiration and preservation of scripture that a brief, personal example of correspondence between friends should be found in our hands today, some 2,000 years after its composition. Philemon, it would appear, was a man of some means, having household slaves and a house large enough to offer hospitality to the Christians forming a local assembly in Colossae, v. 2. The narrative of the letter centres around a man, quite possibly a young man, called Onesimus, a servant (lit. bondman or slave), v. 16, belonging to Philemon. Onesimus means 'profitable' and may not have

been his given name, but simply the way in which he was referred to within the household as 'the useful one'.

There came a day, however, when Onesimus saw and seized an opportunity for freedom. Having stolen money, or goods of monetary value, vv. 18, 19, he left Colossae and headed for the metropolis of Rome, no doubt hoping to find anonymity. The journey would have been both difficult and dangerous, as passage by sea was his only realistic option. Far from finding obscurity, however, subsequent events ensured that his name is indelibly recorded in the eternal word of God!

The sovereignty of God is written large over these twenty-five verses, not least in reminding us of the lengths to which the Spirit of God will go to reach one soul, and that a soul whom the world would consider worthless. For Onesimus, far from finding the freedom he sought, he found himself in prison! Whether by misdemeanour or menial employment, we do not know. What we do know, however, is that in the Roman prison he met Paul the apostle, friend, and spiritual father of Philemon and his family. 'Lucky chance', the world would say. 'Coincidence', but those words are not in God's dictionary. The Christian sees the overruling hand

of a loving God, ordering events according to the counsel of His own will and purpose.

Having led Onesimus to the Lord, Paul instructs him, somewhat reluctantly, v. 13, to return to Philemon, and paves the way for his reception with this brief letter, full of Christian grace and generosity. With him, as added support, Paul will send the faithful Tychicus bearing the letter to the assemblies at Colossae, Col. 4. 7-9.

The letter is not doctrinal, as are most of Paul's writings, but intensely practical. It does not lend itself to clinical and alliterative divisions, but it reveals the very heart of the apostle, beating with warmth and affection for his fellow believers, notwithstanding his own restricted circumstances.

Paul does not introduce himself as an apostle, one having direct authority from God, nor yet as a servant who obeys the will of another, but as a prisoner, one who is dependent upon the mercy of others. This is not a plea for pity, but rather, by acknowledging Christ Jesus as the One who holds the key to his cell door, he raises the status of his situation to the highest level. Paul would see those locks and bars as part of the 'great things he must suffer for my name's sake', Acts. 9. 16. Paul then links with himself his beloved Timothy, of whom he had said to the Corinthians, 'he worketh the work of the Lord, as I also do', 1 Cor. 16. 10.

The primary recipient of the letter was Philemon, but its contents involved the family and the local assembly. Apphia would doubtless have been Philemon's wife, and Archippus, his son. This godly couple are addressed as 'beloved', a genuine note of affection, not flattery, 1 Thess. 2. 5, and although we know so little of him, Paul recognized Philemon as a 'fellowlabourer'; a description which speaks of dignity, responsibility, and unity.

In verse 2, we have the only example of Paul addressing a letter to a sister, but a Christian wife

alongside a believing husband is a sure foundation on which to build. Archippus is called a fellow soldier – the seasoned campaigner Paul reaches out to grasp the hand of the young recruit, acknowledging that they are in the same conflict together.

But then the local church is also addressed, since the reception of Onesimus is involved. It would seem that there were several companies of believers in Colossae, one of which met in Philemon's house. Another was found in the house of Nymphas, Col. 4. 15. The Epistle to the Colossians was to be read by each company and also passed on to the church at Laodicea, Col. 4. 16. Onesimus is mentioned in the Colossian letter as a 'faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you', 4. 9. His past life is not revealed, that was known only by the church in Philemon's house, and of no concern to any other company. We often talk of the autonomy of assemblies. Would to God that we understood and practised it as we should.

The divine blessings of grace and peace accompany the letter. Grace, that which is not deserved, and peace, the fruit of grace in the recipient. Both are appropriate given the subject matter which follows.

This little Epistle is a letter of commendation not only for the reception of the returning Onesimus, but also for the character of Philemon, vv. 4-7. The prayer life of the apostle is a rewarding study. From the word spoken to Ananias concerning the newly converted Saul of Tarsus, 'behold, he prayeth', Acts. 9. 11, to Paul's final writing to Timothy, 'I have remembrance of thee in my prayers night and day', 2 Tim. 1. 3, the apostle heeded his own exhortation to 'pray without ceasing', 1 Thess. 5. 17. Prayer takes many forms, 1 Tim. 2. 1, 2, and in verse 4 it is a prayer of thanksgiving. Paul was deeply grateful for the many individuals and groups of believers whose lives had been reached and changed by the Spirit of God working through him. He was always aware that while he and others may plant and water, it was God who gave the increase, 1 Cor. 3. 6. And so he will give thanks for the kind and generous Philemon, whom Paul was pleased to be able to call his brother.

The 'care of all the churches' was constantly on the mind of the apostle, 2 Cor. 11. 28, and news had filtered through to him of those meeting in the home of Philemon, though evidence would suggest that Paul

may not have visited Colossae as yet, Col. 2. 1. Two commendable virtues were conspicuous in Philemon, love and faith; the order is important. Faith can be genuine, but inactive. Love, on the other hand, is intensely practical. Note again the order, first toward the Lord Jesus, then to the saints. Our love for other believers is a measure and reflection of our love for the Lord. Would Philemon's love reach out to the prodigal but repentant slave Onesimus?

The subject matter of Paul's prayer in verse 4, is now expressed in verse 6. His desire was that Philemon's practical fellowship may cause others to perceive and acknowledge that his benevolence resulted from his faith in Christ Jesus; it was not just altruistic philanthropy. Here was a man who, like his Lord, looked not on his own things, but also on the things of others, Phil. 2. 4. Paul's knowledge of this caused his heart to rejoice in knowing that other saints were blessed by Philemon's love and fellowship, v. 7. On Philemon's part, what he did for others was 'as unto the Lord', little knowing that his actions would be recorded on the page of scripture and become a challenge and encouragement to the people of God throughout the day of God's grace, Heb. 6. 10.



The life and times of Elijah the prophet 7

TRANSLATED AND SUCCEEDED: BUT GOD REMAINS

By **KEN TOTTON** Cambridge, England

Many aspects of the service of Elijah are larger than life and his departure from this world is no exception. Once he had asked to die but God disregarded that request and now in 2 Kings chapter 2 takes him to heaven! In a day of idolatry, God ensures that no grave would be left for men to venerate. And that really gives us the key: the chapter is not so much about Elijah, as about **Elijah's God** – the God who **remains** when the seismic change takes place and Elijah is gone. In his place, Elisha comes to exercise the wisdom and power of God. In 1 Kings chapter 19, he becomes Elijah's assistant; there, Elijah symbolically signals the prophetic succession by putting his mantle on Elisha.

The topic of the chapter

The key hangs near the door, 2 Kgs. 2. 1: God is going to take Elijah to heaven in a **whirlwind**, repeated in describing the event itself, v. 11. The geographical route described in the first half of the chapter (Gilgal – Bethel – Jericho – Jordan) is retraced in the second half as follows: Jordan – Jericho, v. 18 – Bethel, v. 23 – Samaria, v. 25 (via Mount Carmel). This highlights two things:

- 1 the unity of the chapter: i.e., the stories of verses 19 to 22 (blessing), and 23 to 25 (judgement) are integral to the overall message.
- 2 the reality of succession: Elisha retraces the steps of Elijah and visits Carmel, v. 25, the scene of his greatest triumph.

In Luke's Gospel we trace a greater **journey**, a more consequential **exodus**, and more enduring missionary **succession**, one which extends to each of us today.

Following Elijah: the journey to Jordan, vv. 2-6

Three times we read, 'the Lord hath sent me', vv. 2, 4, 6. It is good to see that the Lord is leading His servant every step of the journey home – even on the last leg.

We note Elisha's determination to stay with Elijah. The pattern of dialogue is repeated exactly three times but with a change in ending in verse 6; rather than, 'So they went to', as in verses 2 and 4, we are told, 'so the two of them walked on' NIV. This emphasizes their togetherness. In fact, from the end of verse 6 onwards, they are repeatedly referred to as, 'the two of them', 'they two'.

You and I have not only been apprehended by Christ, but gladly follow Him, and have become inseparably attached to Him in love. When we hesitate, He still says, 'what is that to thee? follow thou me', John 21. 22. Perhaps our Lord's greatest work other than His work on the cross, was the training of the twelve apostles so that the gospel might continue to be proclaimed in the power of the Spirit. Do we devote sufficient focus to ensuring that there are those who will carry on the testimony in the future?

The rapture of Elijah, vv. 7-15

Elijah, Elisha, and indeed 'the sons of the prophets', v. 3, sense that something unspeakably awesome is about to overtake him when he offers Elisha a parting request. Why does

Elijah tell Elisha to stay at points along the route? His command to stay is permissive in nature ('you may stay'). But for Elisha to part company on this day would be equivalent to resigning from the role of successor. His persistence shows his willingness to take up a very demanding role. Is there not a great need in all avenues of Christian service? 'The harvest truly is plenteous, but the labourers are few', Matt. 9. 37.

The miracle of dividing the Jordan recalls the same river being divided upon Israel's arrival into the Land, Josh. 3, 4, which in turn harks back to the crossing of the Red Sea; 'dry ground', v. 8, stresses this. We learn that the God of the Exodus is still powerfully present for Elisha, as He was for Moses and Joshua. What a vital message for us today!

Elisha's request for a **double portion** of Elijah's spirit is of great importance. It alludes to the double portion of the inheritance that the firstborn son should be apportioned, Deut. 21. 17. He is really asking to be identified as Elijah's undisputed successor. Elijah's reply is that this is a 'hard' [difficult] thing – not in the sense of hard to grant, but that it is a hard role to fulfil.

The chariot of fire and horses of fire are not the means of transportation for Elijah to heaven (as is sometimes stated). Instead, he is taken up by a **whirlwind**, v. 11; the chariot is what separates 'the two of them', the phrase used of Elijah and Elisha in devoted combination from verse 6. Elisha has remained close by until divinely separated from his master.

The importance of Elisha fulfilling the requirement of **seeing** Elijah carried up to heaven is emphasized, v. 12. His cry at this point is with reference to Elijah – he is the father, and he is 'the chariots and horsemen of Israel' NIV. Elisha's cry measures the loss of Elijah, both personally, and to Israel. Elijah is a 'one man army', and his loss is devastating. How important it is to keep our eyes on the Man who has ascended through the heavens, if we are to prove His power and grace!

Verses 13 to 15 highlight the

importance of the mantle. It is emphasized by repetition that the mantle is Elijah's. This reminds us of the symbolic transfer of the mantle in 1 Kings chapter 19. We are meant to see the separating of the waters as a repeat performance, but this time by Elisha, cp. vv. 8, 14. God was clearly with Elijah, but where is Jehovah, the God of Elijah now? Is He with Elisha? Thank God, evidently, He is!

And at this climax the trainee prophets who have been watching cry out, 'The spirit of Elijah is resting on Elisha!' v. 15 NIV, and bow before him. Elisha has become the true successor of Elijah – he is now the chariot and horsemen of Israel, 2 Kgs. 13. 14, who will fight for God and speak His word. So, the falling of the mantle denotes the continuity of the ministry now to be exercised by Elisha. Similarly, the ministry of the apostles (and, by extension, our own) is but the



continuation of the ministry of the church's Lord, 'As the Father hath sent me, even so send I you', John 20. 21 RV.

Elisha and the wisdom of God, vv. 16-18

Three proofs confirm Elisha as the man of God, vv. 16-25. The first proof confirms the departure of Elijah, vv. 16-18; he really is no longer here! At the same time, its primary purpose is to stress that Elisha knew the truth of the matter and should have been listened to. The young prophets are keen to search for Elijah's remains so that he can be buried. Here we see that Elisha is characterized by the wisdom of God, in contrast to the sons of the prophets. Wisdom is not a spectacular attribute, but it is vital if the work of God is to succeed.

Second, the healing of the deadly water at Jericho and then, third, the cursing of the mocking youths at Bethel show Elisha to be the new prophet who speaks God's word in **power** – note the phrasing of verse 22 NIV, 'according to the word Elisha had spoken' which matches Elijah's earlier words, 2 Kgs. 1. 17. In the gospel, Christ is both the power of God and the wisdom of God, 1 Cor. 1. 24.

These episodes present contrasting attitudes towards Elisha, and hence towards God, and contrasting outcomes in line with His covenant with Israel. The blessings for obedience in the covenant included promises of productivity in the land; the curses for disobedience included children being killed by wild animals. Both elements of the covenant are found in Leviticus chapter 26. The verb used of the land being unproductive, 2 Kgs. 2. 19, 21, is literally that of being bereaved or barren, and is used of parents being robbed of their children by wild animals, Lev. 26. 22. Hence we have the land being healed from 'barrenness' contrasting with parents made 'barren' of their children.

Deadly Jericho – God in healing grace, vv. 19-22

With regard to the waters of Jericho, we recall the curse pronounced by Joshua over the city, Josh. 6. 26,

which was firstly fulfilled by the death of Hiel's son, 1 Kgs. 16. 34. Everything about the situation of the city is pleasant, but there is a hidden curse. The water is deadly, causing miscarriage both in man and beast. This city is marked by death. But now observe the transforming grace of God at work through His prophet, 'Bring me a new cruse, and put salt therein . . . he went forth unto the spring . . . cast the salt in . . . Thus saith the Lord, I have healed these waters', vv. 20, 21, indicating the transforming **power of God's word**.

What a wonderful lesson to us of the transforming grace and power of God! We too are sent to a world under judgement with the powerful word of God. The miracle recalls what happened at Marah, when a certain tree made the bitter waters sweet. Centuries later God still acts in power!

Idolatrous Bethel – God in judgement, vv. 23-25

A mob of youths, reflecting the hostility of this idolatrous town, confronts the man of God. They come out to meet him on the road. 'Go up, thou bald head' means 'Keep going on your way, don't come in here'. He curses them in the name of the Lord, validated by the two she-bears.

We must learn the goodness and severity of God. If His people will not be moved by His matchless grace, then perhaps God's severe judgements will make them fear and repent and respond to Him. What a solemn thing it is to mock God's messengers.

God remains: Elisha's pathway of faith

God removes His honoured servants, but He carries on His work! Elisha acknowledges this and invokes the 'God of Elijah'. Unlike the young prophets, he ceases to be occupied with Elijah, and instead he focusses on **Elijah's God**. This is the central message of the chapter. In Hebrews chapter 13 verses 7 and 8, the stalwart guides are gone, and their memory is saluted, but Jesus Christ remains the same yesterday, today, even for ever. May the Lord give us the grace, power, and perseverance to step up to whatever service He appoints us in a manner worthy of Him!

Towns and cities in the life of the Lord

Part 5

CANA OF GALILEE

By **STEPHEN BUCKERIDGE** Hurst, England

Cana is a small town in the north of Israel not far from 'Nazareth, where he had been brought up', Luke 4. 16. It is only mentioned in the New Testament in John's Gospel. While most famous for the turning of water into wine at the wedding in chapter 2, it is also the location from where the Lord Jesus healed the Capernaum official's son in chapter 4. Cana is also briefly mentioned as the town from which Nathanael came. Intriguingly though, that detail is not given at the end of chapter 1 (when Nathanael is primarily referred to) but when the disciples go fishing in the final chapter of the book.

These are not merely introductory details, but immediately bring before us the gracious character of the Lord Jesus. Having patiently waited thirty years in the Father's will for the start of His public ministry, it is not in the hubbub of Jerusalem that His first miracle will be done. There is no fanfare or hype. Instead, it is close to His previous home in despised Nazareth, in the northern area referred to as 'Galilee of the Gentiles', Matt. 4. 15, in a rural outpost that this first great sign will be given – with just the disciples seemingly impacted by it. Not only was His glory manifest in the sense of the divine power and design required for the miracle, but also by His humble grace in choosing Cana as the geographic setting!

These simple background details are also a practical encouragement in illustrating that the work of God is often done in relative obscurity, frequently with little in the way of immediate human result.

In each of the three chapters where Cana is mentioned, a specific need is being met. In chapter 2 with the revelation (of His glory), the need was **drink**. In chapter 4 with the

'royal official' [NIV] it was **death**, 4. 49. In chapter 21, post-resurrection, the need was **direction**. We will consider these mentions of Cana in turn.

The marriage – chapter 2

The Lord Jesus was invited to this wedding and was the source of provision and blessing. It is good when today both weddings and subsequent marriages are conducted in accordance with God's will such that we can ask the Saviour to be present and bless.

The actions of the Lord Jesus cannot be interpreted as encouraging the misuse of alcohol. The governor intimated that when people have well drunk, they lose sufficient sense to discern the quality of the wine, v. 10. His ability to discern how good the wine was gives an indication of his relative sobriety. For believers today, there is a clear prohibition on being drunk, Eph. 5. 18, or setting an example that would be for the spiritual detriment of others, Rom. 14. 21. While there is no absolute prohibition (and each must therefore be fully persuaded before the Lord as to their conscience), the way that Timothy needed specific instruction to have even a little for medicinal purposes is surely significant, 1 Tim. 5. 23.

John's use of the word 'sign' is noteworthy. The Greek word is related to the English 'semaphore' – when flags, i.e., visual signs, were shown to communicate a message. 'Miracles, signs and wonders' are referred to elsewhere.¹ 'Miracle' refers to the divine power, 'wonder' to the human reaction, and 'sign' to the divine purpose. John's recording of these divine actions is not random or merely for their own interest's sake but intentionally to attest to the

Saviour's character so that we would believe in His deity, John 20. 30, 31.

Mary's instruction to do whatever the Lord said, v. 5, is good counsel. She was probably the person to have spent the most time in the Lord's physical presence – and her confidence is a telling outcome of that experience. Her words were in response to the Lord's comment, v. 4, and show that she took no umbrage from it. In these being the last recorded words in scripture from Mary, we are left with the abiding sense of how she encouraged the servants to speak directly with the Lord rather than to come via herself as some erroneously teach. Her relative position to Christ is also underlined by the way that in a passage where she could be seen as prominent, she is not referred to by name but on all three occasions by her relationship to the Lord, vv. 1, 5, 12.

A legitimate question could be asked as to why the Lord changed water into wine as His first sign – and how it fits with John's overall purpose? The start of the previous dispensation had been marked by the turning of water into blood that brought death, Exod. 7, whereas the Lord Jesus turned water into wine bringing blessing. It therefore showed the Lord's superiority compared to that which had preceded in the Old Testament. It continues a similar thought from the previous chapter – 'the law was given [came] by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ', John 1. 17.

The man – chapter 4

The official is neither named nor is his exact position identified, helping our focus to stay on the Lord – and John's primary concern of recording authenticating signs. Not that this was the next miraculous work the Saviour did after the wedding – Nicodemus speaks of the signs the Lord had been doing, 3. 2, and this chapter speaks of the things the Galileans had seen the Lord do in Jerusalem, 4. 45. It may have been the second miracle that the Lord did in the locality, or just the second that John is inspired to record.

The events do stand in contrast to chapter 2 and, whereas the wedding showed the Lord was not restricted in time, instantly producing wine that would naturally take many months, this miracle shows that He was not restricted by space, healing at a distance. Likewise, the first miracle was at the request of a mother, the second of a father, both involved unnamed servants and a willingness to submit to the Lord's timing. However, both were genuinely awe-inspiring in the way their power and precision testified to the Lord's uniqueness.

On a practical note, there are many parallels between the way the official spoke with the Lord and the Christian coming in prayer.

- Despite his nobility, the man had to put considerable effort (in the distance travelled) into personally speaking with Christ about an issue he was helpless to resolve. Whatever our achievements – socially or spiritually – we must humbly make whatever effort is required to ensure we are spending time speaking with the Lord on whom we depend.
- The man acted as if the matter were resolved, even though there was nothing he could physically see that had changed. It is a challenge to 'walk by faith, not by sight', 2 Cor. 5. 7!
- Everything had been done by Christ and the man was content with that. Sometimes we must do all we can, illustrated by the filling of the waterpots and, later in John, the removing of the

stone from the tomb of Lazarus. At other times the acceptance that we can do nothing is key, John 15. 5.

- The man does not appear to have rushed back – it is the next day before he arrives. If this was indicative of his peace of mind regarding the Lord's promises, then he sets an excellent example, Isa. 26. 3.

The meal – chapter 21

The mention of Cana as being Nathanael's place of origin in chapter 21 is initially surprising. That detail would have been more logical when he is first mentioned at the start of the book. However, there are many ways that the end of John's Gospel links back to the start.

While John's Gospel is often thought of as having seven signs, the inclusion of this eighth miracle gives an interesting symmetry to the list. The first and eighth signs not only have a link with Cana but involve the provision of a physical need, drink in chapter 2 and food in chapter 21, and relate to the number three, compare 'the third day', 2. 1, with 'the third time' or appearance, 21. 14. This symmetry is the key to a rich vein of study. The second and seventh signs, the nobleman's son, ch. 4, and Lazarus, ch. 11, involve the near or actual death of a family member, the Lord waiting two days, and the giving of life. The third and sixth sign, the healing at Bethesda, ch. 5, and the blind man, ch. 9, involve those ill for a long time, healing on the sabbath connected with Jerusalem,

and a pool and a quotation from Moses. The fourth and fifth signs, the feeding of the five thousand and walking on the water in chapter 6, are the only miracles from John recorded in other Gospels and are both connected with mountains.

A further connection between John chapters 2 and 21 is seen by developing the comparison between the three days, specifically referred to at the start and end of the book. At the start of John's Gospel, there is a day when people believed, 1. 35-42, followed by a day where Nathanael is initially doubtful before believing, vv. 43-51, and a third day where there is great blessing for many, 2. 1. This is mirrored by the end of the book. At the first appearance of the risen Lord, we are told the disciples believed, 20. 19, 20; the second appearance was to Thomas, who was initially doubtful, vv. 24-29, and the third appearance led to great blessing, ch. 21. This interesting pattern is reflected in the divine programme where the church age is associated with many believing. God will then deal with Israel, whose recognition of the Messiah follows unbelief, and this will be followed by great blessing in the Millennium.

Of practical encouragement, it is heartening that despite Nathanael's initial scepticism in chapter 1, he is with the disciples at the end of the book. However shaky our past, that should not deter us from continuing! It may be that he was not a natural fisherman, Cana was several miles away from the lake, but nevertheless he was keen to keep company with those in the boat. In this he sets us a good example where our different backgrounds, characters, interests, and gifts should not be a hindrance to fellowship, 1 Cor. 12.

In conclusion, Cana – like most of our lives – was not a place of major human significance or even biblical prominence. However, we can take encouragement that because of what the Saviour did in connection with it, it is associated with things of lasting value.

Endnote

1 Acts 2. 22; Heb. 2. 4; and 2 Cor. 12. 12.



A Time to Love

By **NATHANAEL REED** St. Thomas, Ontario, Canada
All quotations are taken from the New King James Bible

Part 1

The pages of scripture reveal God's affinity for numbers. In fact, He even seems to have His favourites – specific numbers that keep popping up throughout the pages of the Bible. Theologians have long considered these numbers to be representative of broader spiritual implications. For instance, the number seven is often associated with completeness and perfection, as with the seven days of creation. It is also intriguing to see a corresponding balance between specific numbers in the Old and New Testaments. For instance, there are twelve sons of Israel and twelve disciples of the Lord; the children of Israel spent forty years in the wilderness, while the Lord spent forty days there; seventy elders were appointed by Moses, while Christ selected seventy disciples to spread the good news.

Such an amazing mathematical counterbalance is even present in the story of the Apostle Peter. On the night of Christ's betrayal, Peter denied the Lord three times, then later in 'a question-and-answer session' with the Master, he willingly confessed his love for Christ the same three times, figuratively wiping the slate clean.

Many of the lists appearing in the Bible also present fascinating studies. Perhaps the most sobering of these is found in Proverbs chapter 6 verses 16 to 19, where seven specific items document things that God hates. When reading this passage, one might wonder if there is a corresponding passage that provides a counterbalance – a list of seven things that God loves.

In fact, such a list does exist and is found in the Lord's most famous sermon – the Sermon on the Mount, Matt. 5. 3-11. There, in the Beatitudes, we find a list of specific things that God loves. It is interesting to note, as well, that although Christ described nine Beatitudes, the first seven speak to a person's spiritual character, while the last two describe what such a person can expect for his troubles – persecution.

The chart, below, lists in order:

- seven things God hates, Prov. 6. 16-19.
- seven things He loves, Matt. 5. 3-11.

Comparing these two lists we find an ordered symmetry among the seven corresponding items. There is an ascent from the first to the seventh items in both lists, which begins with an attitude of heart and ends with a legacy that marks one's life and a distinct contrast between each of the corresponding pairs (i.e., 1 with 1; 2 with 2, etc.).

These articles explore the contrast between these corresponding items, and then, to give it a human face, we will briefly reflect on the lives of two very different kings of Israel. The one, David, was Israel's most remarkable monarch; while the other, Saul, was neither a man of God nor a leader

of His people. The testaments of both men will be traced through the characteristics itemized in the two lists – David through those spiritual attributes that God loves, and Saul through what He hates.

One's spiritual condition at ground zero – the poor in spirit/ the haughty spirit

The beginning or 'ground zero' of any spiritual journey involves a personal assessment of one's standing with God. As such, this odyssey starts in one of two ways. Either:

- A realization that one has fallen short of meeting God's standards, then reaching out to Him in humility for salvation. The poor in spirit. Or,
- Going it alone – determining that God's standards of acceptance are not relevant and/or appropriate or deciding that one already measures up without any help from anybody. The haughty spirit.

It is for this reason that the Lord Jesus launches the Beatitudes by describing the very heart of one blessed by God – the person who is poor in spirit

Seven things God hates Prov. 6. 16-19 (Ascending order)		Beatitudes (seven things God loves) Matt. 5. 3-11 (Ascending order)	
ONE'S SPIRITUAL CONDITION AT GROUND ZERO			
1	The haughty spirit	1	Poor in spirit (lacking spiritual arrogance)
↓		↓	
RESPONDING TO GOD'S EXPECTATIONS			
2	Those who lie (from pride)	2	Those who mourn (for grieving God)
↓		↓	
WHAT PROCEEDS FROM THE HEART			
3	Sin (shedding of innocent blood)	3	Meekness (A result of knowing their spiritual condition)
↓		↓	
HEARTS BEFORE GOD			
4	A heart that plans evil	4	A righteous heart
↓		↓	
THE HEART IN ACTION			
5	A heart that runs to evil	5	The merciful heart
↓		↓	
TESTIMONY BEFORE THE WORLD			
6	The deceitful heart	6	The pure in heart (integrity shown in all circumstances)
↓		↓	
A LASTING LEGACY			
7	Troublemakers	7	Peacemakers

– one who realizes that salvation is only possible through Christ. In contrast with this attitude of heart is the individual characterized by their **haughty eyes**. This, of course, is a visible manifestation of the spiritual pride that comes so naturally to the human heart and represents a spirit of open rebellion against God. Rather than looking to God as the One who can satisfy the hunger of the soul, this person looks to themselves as being fully capable of meeting any such need.

King Saul was a man who seemed to get off to a good start as Israel's first monarch. His humility was even recognized by the prophet Samuel who challenged Saul with these words, 'When you were **little** in your own eyes', 1 Sam. 15. 17. Once modest and self-effacing, power and prestige soon taught Saul that it seemed more personally fulfilling to do things his own way. What quickly followed was a dark obsession with holding on to his kingdom at all costs.

King David, on the other hand, was one who knew his limitations and his need to rely on the power and grace of God for success. David made an indelible first impression when he faced off with Goliath. In fact, the main reason he went into battle against the Philistine giant was because he was offended for the Lord, 'But I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied', 1 Sam. 17. 45. His life of humility and dependence upon God is beautifully described in the Psalms, 'My heart is not haughty, nor mine eyes lofty: neither do I exercise myself in great matters, or in things too high for me', Ps. 131. 1.

Responding to God's expectations – those who mourn / those who lie

The second beatitude is, at a glance, perhaps the most perplexing. How does God expect a mourner to be blessed [happy]? But here the Lord is referring to those whose spiritual eyes have been opened to the fact that their sin and rebelliousness have grieved the very heart of their heavenly Father – the same God who sent His beloved Son to die for them.

Conversely, others would deny that

their relationship with God lacks anything, if they even acknowledge His presence. God regards such a self-deceptive attitude as a blatant lie – a lie that lays bare a proud heart that is in open rebellion to God. 'For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse', Rom. 1. 20.

Achieving an acceptable standing with God can only be attained by His grace through Christ, 'not of yourselves: it is the gift of God . . . lest anyone should boast', Eph. 2. 8, 9.

David had one of the softest hearts in scripture. In his life and psalms, we find many examples of a man whose spirit sought earnestly to know God better and love Him more. We see in David one who was quick to mourn whenever he let the Lord down.

A striking contrast between the hearts of David and Saul is evident when comparing their responses to their greatest mistakes. When Samuel confronted **Saul** for not destroying the Amalekites as he was ordered to, Saul, with no hint of remorse, passed the buck, 'I feared the people, and obeyed their voice', 1 Sam. 15. 24. David, on the other hand, when confronted by the prophet, Nathan, after his sin with Bathsheba, accepted responsibility and was immediately remorseful, 2 Sam. 12. 13. David's repentant heart was the sole way of restoring his relationship with a forgiving God.

What proceeds from the heart – meekness / shedders of innocent blood

Gentleness and self-control characterize those that are meek. WIERSBE described spiritual meekness as 'power under control'.¹ We have many examples of this in scripture:

- **Abraham**, when he let Lot choose the best land.
- **Joseph**, when he refused to seek revenge on his brothers.
- **Moses**, who is described as the meekest man on the face of the earth, Num. 12. 3.
- **The Lord**, of course, is the ultimate example of one who was meek, even

describing Himself as gentle and lowly in heart, Matt. 11. 29.

It might seem unusual that in comparing the two lists, meekness stands in contrast with those who shed innocent blood. But if a spirit of meekness gives one an opportunity to grow through trials, what of those who do not react to adversity in this manner? When a person deals with confrontation or having his dignity affronted, he will respond in one of two ways. He will either lash out, even to the point of shedding blood, or respond in a spirit of meekness, controlled power.

David was taught a lesson in meekness by Abigail, the wife of a scoundrel whom David set out to kill when his pride was offended. Abigail intercepted this mission of vengeance and made David realize the rashness of his plans. Later, David commended Abigail for her actions, realizing that he had failed to take into consideration the many innocent people who would have died as a result of his aggressive response to her husband's behaviour: 'blessed be thy advice, and blessed be thou, which hast kept me this day from coming to shed blood, and from avenging myself with mine own hand', 1 Sam. 25. 33 KJV!

When **Saul's** dignity was assaulted, however, he reacted completely without restraint. The most shocking example of this happened when he discovered that the priest, Ahimelech, had provided David with food and Goliath's sword when David was fleeing from him. Enraged, Saul ordered Ahimelech's murder as well as that of eighty-four other priests to avenge this perceived slight, 1 Sam. 22.

These two incidents provide a stark contrast between the two monarchs. Saul was filled with insecurities and pride, continually lashing out at those closest to him, while David was secure in the knowledge that he was walking with God and was dependent on Him not only for guidance and protection, but for justice as well. It was David, in fact, who first penned the words, 'the meek shall inherit the earth', Ps. 37. 11.

Endnote

- 1 <https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/wiersbe-be-bible-study/2-our-god-can-be-trusted-vv-8-14>.

THE PROPHECY OF NAHUM

By **BRIAN CLATWORTHY** Newbury, England

The prophet Nahum prophesied sometime between the fall of the Egyptian capital city of Thebes, which is dated to 663 BC,¹ and the later fall of the city of Nineveh, which is dated to 612 BC. Many Jewish scholars think that Nahum prophesied in the days of King Manasseh, which again would place him in the first half of the seventh century.² A date around 630 BC is probably reasonably accurate, that is, some eighteen years before the fall of Nineveh. This suggests that God allowed a period for repentance, hence Nahum could write in chapter 1 verse 3 that, 'The Lord is slow to anger, and great in power, and will not at all acquit the wicked',³ which is similar to the thrust of Jonah's earlier prophecy against Nineveh, cp. Jonah 3. 4-10. Clearly, though, their repentance was short lived, as God now raises up a second prophet, and later Zephaniah, Zeph. 2. 13-15, to pronounce judgement against Nineveh.

The city of Nineveh was the main city of the Assyrian Empire, which was the most powerful empire in the world for the period from 900 BC to its fall in 612 BC. The ruins of Nineveh stand on the east bank of the Tigris River opposite today's city of Mosul, which is located approximately 250 miles north of Baghdad, in northern Iraq. Nineveh was at the height of its power under the Assyrian kings Sennacherib, Esarhaddon, and Ashurbanipal.

The brutality of the Assyrians was legendary, and their treatment of Israel and Judah had been particularly harsh. The Assyrians had destroyed the northern nation of Israel and its capital, Samaria, in 722 BC, 2 Kgs. 17, leaving the tribes of Judah under its subjection, 2 Kgs. 18. 17 - 19. 37.

Understanding the prophecy of Nahum depends on knowing its particular setting in time and place, since without this understanding Israel and God appear harsh and vengeful. It was not Assyrian imperialism as such that was problematic to Nahum, but rather the cruelty with which it was

wedded – see Nahum 3. 1, Nineveh 'the city of bloods'. For example, Sennacherib, the Assyrian king who invaded Judah in 701 BC, v. 13; 2 Chr. 32. 1-19; Isa. 36. 1-22, recorded his siege of Lachish in carved walls in Nineveh, which included depictions of flaying and impaling some of his captives. Such brutality terrorised Assyria's enemies and angered God, Nahum 1. 2-6. The book of Nahum predicts the defeat and destruction of Nineveh. These prophecies were fulfilled when a coalition of Babylonians, Medes, and Scythians overthrew the city in 612 BC.

The prophecy

The prophecy has a double title and is described in verse 1 of chapter 1 as 'The book of the vision of Nahum'. This identifies the method of revelation from God to the prophet, which is subsequently made available to a wider audience through a book. The term 'vision' or 'oracle' is a technical term in Hebrew, which, in most contexts, may be rendered 'war oracle against a foreign nation'. We are thus prepared for what follows, a prophetic utterance against an enemy of Judah.

The name of the prophet, 'Nahum', means 'comforted' and is derived from a Hebrew root word that conveys the idea of 'one who comforts'. An apt name perhaps for a prophet whose *raison d'être* was principally to bring judgement upon Nineveh, but, at the same time, to provide comfort to the oppressed. So, Nahum did not simply hail the fall of Nineveh, he set this event within the context of the biblical teaching of the retributive justice of God. Nahum reminded his readers that God is just and that the evil nations of the world cannot, and will not, escape His judgement. The present events in the Ukraine are very much in point here.

Nahum is described as the Elkoshite, but the actual location of his hometown is uncertain. What is certain, however, is that his prophecy comes to pass in 612 BC, and once again demonstrates the accuracy of the word of God.

Before we analyze the major sections of the prophecy, it should be noted that it starts with what is often referred to as a hymn in honour of a divine warrior who comes out to battle against His enemies – note that the word 'rebuketh' in verse 4 has a militaristic context here. As CHISHOLM writes, 'it more likely refers to a battle cry that terrifies and paralyzes the enemy'.⁴ Nahum may be viewed as a watchman on the walls of the city of Nineveh warning the people against an imminent attack from this divine warrior, but, at the same time, prophesying the demise of the city. The hymn in chapter 1 verses 2 to 11 describes the person and attributes of God that constitute the basis of all His actions towards mankind. It draws down heavily on the imagery in Exodus chapter 34 verses 6 and 7, where God passes His presence before Moses. Not only is God slow to anger,⁵ but He is a just God, and will punish the guilty. The words 'jealous', 'avenger' (NKJV) and 'vengeance' used in this hymn to describe God's actions should not be viewed as something arbitrary or based on revenge. They simply reflect how zealous or full of rage God is for that which is just, cp. our Lord's actions in the cleansing

of the temple, John 2. 13-22, as He fulfilled Psalm 69 verse 9. The reason why God was jealous was because His people flirted with other gods. He demanded exclusivity in His relationships with His people. Notice that in quoting Exodus chapter 34 verse 6, Nahum in chapter 1 verse 3 changes the emphasis from the God who abounds in steadfast love to the God who is 'great in power'. This suggests that God had been patient with Nineveh, but His steadfast love and willingness to forgive were now exhausted with them. When those who had been subjected to the tyranny of the Assyrians, however, took time to reflect upon the attributes and power of their God then they would find hope for the future – 'The Lord is good to those who hope in Him, a haven on a day of distress; He is mindful of those who seek refuge in Him', Nahum 1. 7 Tanakh translation. The hymn is not satisfied with simple objective description, but becomes much more personal, closing by confronting the king of Nineveh directly as 'you' are facing God's wrath, v. 11.

There are various ways of analysing the book of Nahum from chapter 1 verse 12 onwards, but one that is perhaps the easiest to see is its chiasmic or inverted structure.⁶ This structure is found in the Bible particularly in the Old Testament in the Psalms, and in the New Testament in the Epistle of James. Early paragraphs are matched by later paragraphs but in reverse order. The central section then stands out as an emphasis of the whole book. Nahum's structure is as shown in the table below.⁷

The imagery throughout the prophecy is that of a court scene where God addresses both Judah and Nineveh through alternating

pronouns (he/his/you/them/their). God acknowledges that Judah's troubles were directly from His hand – their sin is not mentioned here, but it is clear from Isaiah chapter 10 verses 5 to 10 that the immediate cause of their punishment and captivity by the Assyrians, who acted as proxy for God – 'the Assyrian, the rod of my anger . . . I send him against a godless nation' NIV – was because they had provoked Him and turned away from Him like any pagan, godless nation. The time had now come, though, to liberate Judah – 'I will break off his yoke from you, and burst your bonds apart' NKJV – and punish the Assyrians through the coming might of the Babylonians. Here again it is God who is behind Babylon's actions, as the author indicates by using the term 'attacker' NIV in chapter 2 verse 1. The same word is used elsewhere of God.⁸ Whilst God allowed the Assyrians to destroy the northern kingdom of Israel, eventually bringing it to an end, Judah survived so that the Messianic line through David was preserved.

Some miscellaneous points

- A. Notice the play on the Hebrew word for blood in chapter 2 verse 3. Nahum describes in vivid colours ('red' and 'scarlet') the shields and armour of the soldiers that are drenched in blood, cp. 2 Kgs. 3. 22.
- B. The name Huzzab in chapter 2 verse 7 may be the name of the queen of Nineveh or could simply be a reference to a queen.
- C. 'Woe to the bloody [or blood stained] city', Nahum 3. 1 – The Assyrian king Ashurbanipal records his actions against a captured city in a royal inscription as follows, 'I captured many soldiers alive. The rest I burnt . . . I built a pile of live (men

and) heads before their gate. I burnt their adolescent boys and girls', MILLARD.⁹

- D. Notice the play on words in respect of Nahum's name in chapter 3 verse 7. Judah could take comfort from Nahum's ('the comforter's') message, but there was no comfort for Assyria in the same message.

Key themes in the Book of Nahum

1. The sovereignty of God in the universe as well as in world history, as He controls the rise and fall of the nations of the earth.
2. His focus on salvation history, preserving a remnant for the future blessing of mankind – good tidings.
3. The attributes of God reflected in His care and compassion for His people – those who trust in Him can find comfort in his protection.
4. A God who is slow to anger and long-suffering yet demonstrates a zeal for justice, who will always bring the guilty/godless to account – the punishment will always fit the crime.

Endnotes

- 1 The city is referred to as No-Amon (NIV/ESV 'Thebes') in Nahum chapter 3 verse 8, and later verse 10 provides a graphic account of the fall of this city and subsequent exile. This indicates that the book of Nahum was composed later than this event, but before the fall of Nineveh in 612 BC.
- 2 According to 2 Chronicles chapter 33 verses 9 to 11, Manasseh was taken into Assyrian captivity because he had led Judah astray. An inscription relating to King Esarhaddon of Assyria lists 'Manasseh, king of Judah' as one of the Assyrian subjects – see JAMES B. PRITCHARD, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, Princeton University Press, pg. 291.
- 3 cp. Neh. 9. 17; Ps. 103. 4.
- 4 ROBERT J. CHISHOLM JR, *Handbook on the Prophets*, Baker Academic, pg. 429.
- 5 James, in chapter 1 verse 19 of his letter, encourages believers to copy this trait.
- 6 A chiasm is a word derived from Latin based on the Greek letter X(Chi) to symbolize the inverted sequence or cross-over of parallel words or ideas.
- 7 This is the chiasmic structure suggested for this prophecy by ROBERT J CHISHOLM JR.
- 8 2 Sam. 22. 15; Hab. 3. 14; Zech. 13. 7.
- 9 ALAN R. MILLARD, *Nahum*, Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary, pg.159.

A Assyrian king taunted/Judah urged to celebrate, 1. 12-15
B Dramatic call to alarm, 2. 1-10
C Taunt, 2. 11, 12
D Announcement of judgement, 2. 13
E Woe oracle, 3. 1-4
D Announcement of judgement, 3. 5-7
C Taunt 3. 8-13
B Dramatic call to alarm, 3. 14-17
A Assyrian king taunted as others celebrate, 3. 18, 19

The servant amidst pressure

By **RODERICK BARTON** Birmingham, England

Undoubtedly in our western world, many people are seeking help with 'stress'. An alarming number of people are finding the pressures of life unbearable, and concern has been expressed at the volume of medication consumed to relieve the pressures and problems of life.

Where does the believer stand in all this? Challenges abound in personal, home, business, and assembly life; the pressure is on. How can we cope? It is clear that a key resource for the believer is found through our relationship with Christ and our appreciation of what the word of God says. We have so much to learn in God's school where the motto is 'But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ', 2 Pet. 3. 18. The Lord Jesus has faced the pressures and problems of life. He has passed through this scene. He knows far more than we shall ever know about its utter hostility, violent opposition to anything spiritual, and every device of the 'prince of this world', Satan himself. The Lord Jesus said, 'For the prince of this world . . . hath nothing in me', John 14. 30, to which He later added, 'I have overcome the world', 16. 33.

Mark's Gospel gives us Christ as the servant and there are at least forty occasions on which we, from a human standpoint, would judge that He was 'under pressure'. However, the Lord Jesus Christ never has, and never will be, in any circumstance over which He has no control. He is the master of every circumstance. This is why we must look at His words and actions in every situation in scripture.

In the first chapter of Mark, after the Father speaks from heaven, 'Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased', 1. 11, the Lord Jesus is in the wilderness for forty days. He is with the wild beasts and is tempted of Satan. After this, He calls four men from their fishing to follow Him. From

the middle of the chapter onwards, we read of the man with the unclean spirit, Simon's mother-in-law lying sick with a fever, and all the city descending upon Him with all their sick and demon possessed. In verse 35, the Lord Jesus is up very early and goes out into a 'solitary place' to pray, but is followed by Simon and the others who look for Him to tell Him, 'All men seek for thee'. There is not one word of complaint. He goes forth to preach, cast out demons, and heal. So great is the public knowledge of Christ and His miracles that He cannot go into the city but receives those 'from every quarter' in 'desert places'.

The second chapter finds the Lord Jesus in the crowded house at Capernaum with the critics out to oppose Him. In chapter 4, He sends the multitude away and enters a ship, only to be soon on a storm-tossed sea. He is calmly asleep on a pillow, but He arises to rebuke the wind and still the turbulent sea. There is no pause for rest, for as soon as they arrive on the other side they come immediately upon a demon-possessed wretch of a man, who lived amongst the tombs, an outcast from society. Once again, the Lord Jesus meets this man's need. Further, in chapter 5, there is the touch on the hem of His garment and the raising of Jairus's daughter to life. Note the context, demons, disease,



and death, yet hopelessness gives way to rich blessing despite satanic opposition, the crowd around Him, and being laughed to scorn.

In chapter 6, the Lord Jesus desires that they should all rest awhile, but the multitude pursue Him and, in His compassion, He turns again to teach them. Then, He miraculously feeds over 5,000 people with five loaves and two fishes. Withdrawing from His disciples, He departs into a mountain to pray, although He is soon walking on the water to His disciples and healing the sick.

All the way to the cross, His ministry to individuals and the multitude was full of compassion. Every time He withdrew Himself for quietness and prayer, the time spent did not last long, yet He never complained, never turned anyone away, never avoided any situation. The perfect Servant shows the perfect way of facing pressure and consider the results! The answer does not lie in avoiding problems, people, need, or criticism. To begin to cope with those pressures that threaten to engulf us, we must get before God and commune with Him.

If we look with praying hearts into the scriptures, there is also a wealth of help and encouragement. Paul encountered pressures on every hand and survived perils day and night, yet he served God. He wrote, 'I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me', Phil. 4. 13. This is the beginning of developing our character to cope with pressure in a Christ-like manner. There are no easy answers, but with the Lord Jesus there is untold blessing to enrich us through these things. Does not the scripture say, 'Cast thy burden upon the Lord, and He shall sustain thee: he shall never suffer the righteous to be moved', Ps. 55. 22? The thought is not to 'cast thy burden on the Lord, and He will solve everything in a moment, and it will be "sunshine and roses"', but 'He shall sustain [lit. "to hold up", "to protect" in the sense of defending one's cause before a tribunal] thee'. The Lord Jesus is so very interested in how we face life with its challenges and pressures. Remember, we are exceedingly precious to Him. Let us seek His help to be Christ-like in all our ways amidst the pressures around us.

QuestionTime

Conducted by
Frank A. Proudlock

QUESTION

Should I be at assembly gatherings?

ANSWER

'Should' sets a low bar as we begin to address this question. 'Should' suggests obligation or duty. It is symptomatic of an underlying lack of motivation to come into the presence of the Lord. As the Good Shepherd, the Lord Jesus spoke of Himself, 'To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice; and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. And when he brings out his own sheep, he goes before them; and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice', John 10. 3, 4 NKJV. The picture contrasts the Old and New Testament dispensations. The law was like a sheepfold based on rule keeping and constraint, fencing around those who were under it. In contrast, now we, as His sheep, hear the voice of the Lord Jesus and willingly follow Him. We desire to be in His presence, not because we have to be, but because we want to be. So, let us raise the bar much higher and consider why we come along to assembly gatherings, not through constraint, but because of a genuine desire to be there. Here are three reasons to reflect on:

Because of the Lord

The Lord Jesus said, 'where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst', Matt. 18. 20. The context of this well-known verse directly relates to church discipline and dealing with strife among believers. However, we can apply the principle that the Lord Jesus has promised to be personally present when Christians gather together as a local church, at the time when they gather, and in the place where they gather. Although saints may get together in a house or online, there is something fundamentally different when Christians gather as an assembly. They constitute the house of God, 1 Tim. 3. 15, the very place where God is present. It is the only place on this earth today where God is personally present in such a way. His presence should be palpable. So much so that, through the atmosphere in an assembly and the exercise of spiritual gifts by Christians, a person from outside should find, 'the secrets of his heart made manifest; and so falling down on his face he will worship God, and report that God is in you of a truth', 1 Cor. 14. 25. Our desire to be in the presence of the Lord Jesus ought to be that of a deep longing. As the psalmist said, 'My soul longeth, yea, even fainteth for the courts of the Lord: my heart and my flesh crieth out for the living God', Ps. 84. 2.

Because we can encourage God's people

The local church constitutes a body which

is incomplete when we are not present. As members of that body, we all have different roles and are endowed with different spiritual gifts. This is the teaching of 1 Corinthians chapter 12. 'And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it', v. 26. The collective experience shared amongst God's people is what we call fellowship, and we all need it. Our presence in the meeting encourages God's people. This can even be just because we are present, but also as we contribute audibly or inaudibly, or perhaps provide a listening ear to, or offer a word of prayer for, a believer going through a difficult time. Our presence when a local church gathers, edifies, or builds up, God's people, Rom. 15. 2. Conversely, God's people can also be discouraged by our absence.

Because God's people can encourage us

Although we did not deserve it, God did much more than forgive us of our sins the day we were saved. John reminds us, 'Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God!', 1 John 3. 1 NKJV.¹ We are now part of God's family. Like a family, the assembly is a place where we are cared for and protected, and where we can grow and develop spiritually. It is a hospital for the spiritually sick, a school to learn about the Lord and His word, and a place to fall back to in respect to the spiritual battle we face in the world.² We need to be at the meetings for our own benefit.

Obligation or ritual are low forms of motivation. Much better to approach the meetings with gratitude to the Lord, and anticipation. However, sometimes we can grow cold in heart, or the assembly we belong to may be experiencing problems. At such times a sense of duty honed from getting into good practices can bring us into contact with other Christians who may be able to help us through their encouragement and ministry. Ultimately, our main motivation should be a desire to be in the presence of the Lord who loves us and died for us.

Endnotes

- ¹ The idea behind the expression is what 'unearthly' or 'other worldly' love - KENNETH S. WUEST, *Word Studies in the Greek New Testament*, Eerdmans.
- ² A hospital: Luke 4. 18; Mark 2. 16, 17; Matt. 11. 28. A school: 2 Tim. 3. 16, 17. Rest from battle: Eph. 6. 10-20.

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'There was a swarm of bees and honey in the carcase of the lion', Judg. 14. 8.



'There was a swarm of bees and honey in the carcase of the lion', Judg. 14. 8

It is Judges chapter 14 that introduces us to the enigma that is Samson. He is a man whom the Lord blessed, 13. 24, and whom He moved to deliver Israel from their Philistine oppressors, 13. 1, 25, yet his initial steps are hardly in the direction that we might expect. He 'went down', 14. 1, 5, 7, 19; 15. 8. Although his association with a woman of Timnath was because 'the Lord . . . sought an occasion against the Philistines', 14. 4, Samson did not seek the mind of God in the matter, nor did he consult with his parents, except to command them to 'get her for me; for she pleaseth me well', v. 3.

It is in that mission to secure his Philistine bride that Samson encounters a lion. It is hardly surprising that when separated from his parents, and in the vineyards of Timnath, he should encounter an adversary. Proverbs encourages us to 'ponder the path of thy feet, and let all thy ways be established', 4. 26. What a pity that Samson had omitted to follow similar advice! Yet in this extremity, 'the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon' Samson and he rent the lion 'as he would have rent a kid', Judg. 14. 6.

After this initial meeting and conversation with the woman, Samson returned to Timnath some time later to obtain his bride. It is at this point that he discovers that what is left of the lion had become a hive for a swarm of wild bees. No doubt the activity and noise of the bees would have attracted his attention, but it is the honey that becomes the focus. It is telling that Samson did not stop to think about what the Spirit of the Lord had wrought by him, but rather how his fleshly appetites might be satisfied.

Not only had Samson chosen a Philistine bride, but he had also become associated with the vineyards of Timnath, and now the dead body of a lion. As CONSTABLE also notes, 'When he scraped the honey out of the lion's carcass with his hand . . . he broke part of his Nazirite vow . . . By giving them [his parents] some of the unclean honey without telling them that it was unclean, Samson callously led them into defilement. His parents had previously sanctified him, but now he desecrated them'. In a land that 'floweth with milk and honey', Deut. 31. 20, how sad to see that which was a divine promise and which should have been a blessing being used to defile!

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