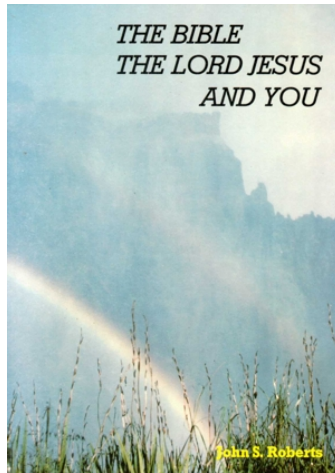


***THE BIBLE
THE LORD JESUS
AND YOU***



John S. Roberts

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The New King James Version (NKJV) is also known as the Revised Authorised Version (RAV) in England.

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Thanks are also expressed to all those who, willingly or unwittingly, helped in the writing of this book. The incidents related are all founded in fact, but any names are entirely fictional. The cover photograph shows a rainbow in the spray of the Victoria Falls, from Zambia.

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THE BIBLE

CHAPTER 1

"IT'S like wallpaper paste," she muttered.

"It's semolina," I told my daughter.

"Salmonella," retorted her older brother, "that's food poisoning."

"Well I don't like it," she said. "But you haven't tasted it," I reasoned.

"I haven't tasted it," she replied, "because I don't like it."

We laugh at childish reasoning to unsampled food. Yet our attitudes as grown ups are not very different. So many people adopt exactly the same attitude to the Bible. They do not believe it so they haven't read it!

This book asks you to be fair. It asks you to set aside preconceived notions. It asks you to give the Bible a "hearing".

It is not the intention of this book to "defend" the Bible. We shall not present proof for its reliability and accuracy, for two reasons. One is that other books do that and do it very well. The second is that you do not defend a tiger. A tiger speaks for itself. The Bible claims to be the word of God. It too speaks for itself.

The object of this book, then, is first to urge you to open the Bible. It asks you to take a look, or another look, at what it says. Sample it. Become more familiar with it.

Some years ago there was a series of talks locally about the Bible. Several people came and asked if the series could deal with the contents of the Bible. They had read the gospels often enough. They were familiar with some of the other well known stories too. Yet they did not feel that they knew the book as a whole.

"Tell us about some of these more obscure books," they said. "What are they about?" "Give us a summary so that we can see what the Bible is saying." "We want to know where its teaching leads." So that was what we did.

The first section of this book is going to do that too. Then it will examine very briefly some of the reasons people give for not reading it. "It's full of contradictions," they say. "It's not reliable:" "It's out of date:" "It's too long. I don't have time."

Some of these complaints must receive attention, but later. We would not dream of criticising the works of Shakespeare if we had not first read them. Nor would we accept the opinion of anyone else who hadn't studied his subject first.

We shall therefore concentrate on getting a good general picture of the Bible. Then we shall be in a better position to evaluate its claims.

The Bible is the only surviving history book about the life and work of Jesus Christ. It is the only source of information about the Son of God.

For this reason the second part of this book is about the Lord Jesus Christ. No other single person has made such a mark on history as Jesus. He is unique. He is not the far-removed figure of stained glass. Neither is he party to a "live and let live" society where anything goes. Jesus was a real man, yet he is the glory of God. His devotion to the standards and will of his Father have won him a place at God's right hand.

The simple Bible truth concerning the Lord can help us to find ourselves. Stripped of its mystique and the fables of many years it can help us identify with him. It can give peace of mind for the present and firm hope for the future.

The Bible is also the only book which offers an escape route from death. There is scarcely nothing that men and women will not do to save life. Yet in the Bible the issues of life and death are fully explained - and largely ignored.

That is why our third section looks at You. It examines some of today's values and attitudes. It suggests that we should take a long hard look at our priorities in the light of the Bible's teaching. The word of God and the life of Jesus demand that we rethink, and perhaps restructure, our lives.

CHAPTER 2

I ONCE had a neighbour who bought a roof-rack and had problems assembling it. He laid all the pieces out on his front lawn, but they did not seem to fit. He had begun to despair of the thing. It made no sense to me either. He was convinced that the wrong pieces had been supplied. When I asked if there were any instructions, he didn't think so. There had been a piece of paper in the box but he had thrown it away.

We retrieved the paper and assembly was a simple operation. Within minutes it all made sense. It fitted together perfectly. I think my neighbour felt a bit of a fool.

Yet there are so many like him, ignoring the instructions and wondering why life doesn't make any sense. Can you imagine it? God, creator of the human being, gives us the Bible, an instruction manual. Most of us try to get by without it!

The Book of Books

Today, more than ever, men and women are concerned about job satisfaction. Finding "fulfilment" has become important. Yet the one book that tells us why we were made goes largely unread. The Book of books, written to tell us what life is about is seldom consulted. Is it any wonder that the world is in the mess it is?

Almost the first noticeable thing about the Bible is its size. Some modern literary masterpieces are long. Most books are not. The Bible is large or, if made smaller, is printed in close type hard to read.

This is because the Bible is really a library of books. The title actually means "the books". The books have been bound into one volume because they make up a set. They depend on one another. Together they form a complete story. Individual books cannot be properly understood on their own.

The title also contains the word "Holy". This means separate, put aside for special use. The Bible is different from all other books.

There are several ways in which we may consider it different. First of all we shall be struck with the transparent honesty of the writers. Their openness in writing of failure and sin, even their own, is most unusual. It is clear that they are hiding nothing. Their language is direct and forceful.

Secondly the standards they uphold are to be admired. They present ideals far outside those to which men normally aspire. They consistently condemn what is offensive to God and applaud what is right.

Thirdly the Bible displays an amazing foreknowledge of future events. It predicts the future with an accuracy that would be alarming if we were to meet it anywhere else.

All this is in keeping with the Bible's claims to be the word of God. The Bible has only one author. God used many writers, but His message has a "wholeness" about it. It harmonises. It fits together.

The books - there are 66 of them - are divided into two main sections. One is called the Old Testament, and one the New Testament. The word testament (or covenant) means a solemn undertaking. Each testament shows the way in which God has had mercy on people.

The Old Testament is the record of His mercy to the nation of Israel. It describes the covenant, or promises, God made to them. The New Testament is concerned with a development of this for others. It shows God's mercy to all nations.

This fact leads many to conclude that the Old Testament is unimportant. A lot of people have an acquaintance with the New Testament but have not read the Old. Some have Bibles which are not complete. They contain a New Testament and, perhaps, some of the Psalms to give comfort in times of difficulty.

This will not do however. We would not expect to understand other books by starting to read over half way through. It is like trying to find the way from Lands End to John O'Groats with only a map of Scotland. Over half of the journey would be missing. It would not be surprising if, in such circumstances, we got lost.

A Guidebook

In fact that is a very good way of thinking of the Bible, like a plan. It is a kind of guidebook through life. It is given by the One who knows what life is about because He created life.

So far we have looked at the title of the book. From the contents page we have learned that there are two sections and many books. Some have names familiar to us. Others may sound very strange. We have mentioned the author too. He is God, although His name does not appear on the cover as it might with most other books.

Often people like to steal a glance at the last page of a book first. Some want to know how the story ends before they start. The last page of the Bible presents an exciting climax. It promises intervention in human affairs. It looks forward to a great event that will change the course of the world. How this happens and what leads to it we must discover later. Just now we need to go back to the beginning.

Almost all the books of the Old Testament were originally the spoken word of God. His messages were given through prophets and righteous men who faithfully recorded them on scrolls.

People sometimes ask who chose these books? Who decided which ones were God's word and which were ordinary books? The answer is that no-one sat down and made rules about which books would go into the Bible. God saw to it that the ones we need have survived. He has preserved the words that truly reveal Him and teach us of His purpose.

The Bible developed, therefore, over a period. It was a collection of holy books which men and women knew were the word of God. These were the books they turned to in times of need or distress. They were the books they revered and relied on for guidance. They were the books, therefore, which were copied and translated when others were lost.

The Bible is therefore entirely God's book.

The books which make up our old Testament were once the Bible of Jesus. The Jews divided their Scriptures into three. First was the Law which meant the first five books only of our Bible.

Then they spoke of the Prophets. These included the prophets we know such as Isaiah and Jeremiah. They also included books like Samuel and Kings. This was because such books cover a period when other prophets were at work -Samuel, Elijah and Elisha.

Thirdly there were the Writings. These were other miscellaneous books such as Job, the Psalms, etc.

Today we may divide the Old Testament in a slightly different way. There is a group of history books which run from Genesis to Esther Then a group of poetry books follows, Job to Song of Solomon. The third group is a prophecy section occupied by Isaiah to Malachi.

Beginnings ...

Genesis is the book of beginnings; its name tells us this. It tells us of the beginning of the earth. It recounts the beginning of God's rescue plan to save men and women from sin. A new beginning after the flood comes into this book. Genesis shows how God began to choose men and nations to carry out His will. It contains His first promises to them.

The first chapter is devoted to the account of the creation of the world. It is not concerned with the universe. It does not deal with any other activity of God that might take place elsewhere. It shows only how our planet came to be as we know it.

The account is not a scientific one. It does not go into detail as to how this and that were done. It is simply God's explanation of the order in which He made everything. There is no room for the theory of evolution, however. Genesis makes it very clear that God purposefully made each thing that was created. He did not begin a process and leave it to develop over millions of years. He designed and made the work which is described each day. When He had finished, everything was very good.

The next chapter is like a magnifying glass, or a zoom lens. It takes us for a close-up view of the sixth day's work. Here the creation of man is explained in greater detail. It is not the description of a different creation from chapter one. It merely expands on how man and woman were each made. This shows the reason for differences in their make-up. It shows too the roles they were each to play. However unpopular these ideas today, they are part of the wisdom of the Creator.

Marriage too is seen from God's point of view. He designed it. It has become unfashionable with some. Yet the family unit is part of God's wise plan for us.

Adam and Eve

Chapter three is about the way in which Adam and Eve disobeyed God. It was not a sin of immorality as many imagine. It was simple disobedience of a commandment which God had given. They ate from the one tree that was forbidden to them.

Because they refused to believe what God had said, they suffered the death sentence. It was a punishment for their sin. They became subject to the ageing process and, eventually, to death. They lost the privileges of Eden where they had lived in the Creator's presence. Now they would have to work in order to eat and live.

God put in motion a plan to help men and women to find their way back to Him. He promised that from Eve's descendants there would eventually be born one special man. He would overcome the sinful tendencies to which Adam and Eve had given in. He would be capable of bridging the gulf which man's sin had caused between God and man.

That completes our survey of the Bible's first three chapters. They are very important chapters. They set the scene for what is to follow. They help us understand our relationship with God. They explain why our society is so sick. They offer real hope for a solution.

They have been sadly ridiculed. Distortion of their simple facts has led to ignorance and misunderstanding. We need to get back to Bible truth. We need to get back to the beginning. Then we can make some sense of life.

CHAPTER 3

I RECALL as a small boy standing on the bridge over the river in the village where I was born. It was a fairly new bridge. The previous one had been washed away.

It seemed impossible to me that any amount of water could wash away a bridge. Thick stone pillars firmly planted in the river bed carried the road and footpath. A high parapet prevented curious little boys, like me, from falling over. It was hard to believe that all this had been swept away in a flood. But it had, along with a shop, vehicles, chicken huts and a great deal more.

Noah and the Ark

The cause of that particular flood was a reservoir that burst. A torrent of water swept down the valley causing tremendous damage and some loss of life. The flood of Noah's day was quite different. That was no accident. It was an act of God.

When insurance companies use that expression, "an act of God", they do so to describe an event beyond man's control. It does not reflect any belief in God. Yet the flood was an act of God. It was an act of judgment on a depraved world. Fifteen hundred years of history have passed between Genesis chapters 3 and 6. In that time, society had got worse and worse. Eventually the only remedy was its complete destruction. Noah was saved before he became overwhelmed by the wickedness. But it was God who provided the means of his salvation. He told him what to do and how to do it.

The value of accounts like these is not confined to the Sunday School. Noah was a man who showed obedience. He no doubt also displayed an uncommon faith in what God had said despite scorn from his friends. But the New Testament draws other lessons from these events for us.

Jesus points to the preoccupation with everyday things that characterised Noah's generation. He warns of the danger of leaving God out of our lives. He speaks too of his second coming being unexpected. It will be as when the flood overtook the unprepared world of Noah's day.

Peter the disciple sees the flood as being like baptism. Noah's experience was a pointer to our own. Baptism, being fully immersed in water, is the vehicle of our salvation. Noah left behind an evil world, and passed through the waters to a new world. God calls us to leave sin behind, be baptised and make a new start.

God made a covenant with Noah. This is the first use of this word covenant in the Bible. As we have previously said, it is a mark of God's mercy. God promised Noah that he would not again destroy the earth by a flood.

Noah's family grew. They were spread far and wide. Within a very short time sin was again a massive problem. God confounded the language. Families who had already drifted far from God in their thinking now drifted away from each other.

Abraham and a New Nation

Moving house was a regular thing in my childhood. We did it so often it became quite a joke with relatives and friends. By the time I reached my twenties, I had notched up over a dozen different addresses. Sometimes it was fun for a child. We had no car and would often travel with the furniture van. We would be sat on the sofa looking out over the tailboard as we journeyed.

It would not have been such fun if there had not been a known destination. It was the looking forward that made it exciting. We always knew exactly where we were going.

In Abraham, God found a man who pleased Him. He was an inhabitant of a prosperous city called Ur, a city in Chaldea. God made a covenant with Abraham too. He made him important promises.

God also made heavy demands on the man's faith. Abraham was told to pluck up his roots and move. But his destination was not disclosed. He was to go to a land that God would show him and set off without knowing where. From a human point of view there was nothing to look forward to. Only his confidence in God and what God promised drove him to respond.

The promises had to do with ownership of land and blessings for many nations. They concerned Abraham and future generations of his family. They had far reaching effects. Through them Abraham understood about the work of Jesus Christ. He lived 2000 years before Jesus was born. Yet the Gospel was preached to Abraham.

Through Abraham's son Isaac and Isaac's son Jacob, God pursued His plan. He repeated the promises He had made to Abraham for these men. There seemed to be no immediate fulfilment of them. Jacob even had to leave the land which God had promised them. Famine drove him into Egypt. Yet he also had confidence in God's covenant. His name was changed to Israel as a sign of God's mercy to him. In Egypt Jacob's twelve sons grew to become a nation. They were the children of Israel.

CHAPTER 4

MY father used to speak of a man who did not believe in miracles. He used to point to the drying up of the Red Sea or the River Jordan as examples. Never could he accept that Israel had crossed the sea and the river on dry ground.

Then, somehow, he found himself fortunate enough to do what Israel had done. I do not remember exactly where it was. However, he was able, somewhere abroad, to walk across a wide stretch of water on dry ground. The reason was that there had been a landslip upstream. For a while the water was completely cut off.

Yet that man would still not believe in miracles. He maintained that it was a sheer coincidence. Some freak event had enabled him to cross the river like Israel had done. No doubt something similar had occurred in their day.

In fact it was strong winds that held the sea waters back for Israel. The Bible tells us so. It says that God sent a mighty east wind and made the waters stand up as a wall. God often uses the elements of nature which are in His control. His power operates them to achieve His purpose.

But it was a miracle all the same. Israel was trapped. The sea was in front of them. Behind them was the Egyptian army in hot pursuit. Moses stood on the bank. At God's word he raised his rod above him. At that precise moment the waters parted to allow Israel across. That was the miracle that saved Israel.

Israel Leave Egypt

The book of Exodus is about the exit of Israel from Egypt. They had become slaves there. As a nation they were thoroughly demoralised. They were unable to rebel.

Then God intervened. He sent Moses as a leader of the people to rescue them. After a prolonged display of His power through ten plagues, God brought Israel out. He saved them from their bondage. At the Red Sea He saved them from death.

Exodus continues with details of the nation's journey through desert. They were en route back to the land God promised Abraham. It is the land, part of which is called Israel today.

God halted the nation at Mount Sinai. There He gave them His law. He taught them how they were to worship Him. God made a covenant with Israel. His mercy made them His specially chosen people.

Here are the verses which tell us about this:-

"You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to me above all people; for all the earth is mine. And you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

(Exodus 19:4-6)¹

Some people object to what God did here. They feel it was unfair. They cannot accept that the Jews are the chosen people and point to their wickedness to prove it.

Responsibility and Privilege

However, above all else, God shows that He is just and fair. In the first place God did not choose the Jews from mere favouritism. He chose them because He had made promises to their ancestors. We looked briefly at this when we considered Genesis.

Secondly, God's purpose was not with the Jews alone. His promise to Abraham was to bless all nations through him. If you have been the oldest child in a family, you will know how it feels. There are certain privileges - your bedtime may have been later than the others, for example. But there are great responsibilities, too. The oldest often takes the blame for things. He, or she, was the one who should have known better.

It was like that with Israel. God described them as His firstborn, or eldest son. That blessing brought a weight of responsibility. Israel were to keep God's covenant. They were to be true in their response to His mercy. History shows that the nation was not.

¹ All quotations in this book are from the Revised Authorised Version of the Bible. The reader will find it helpful to follow the quotations made in any version of the Bible. The words used will be different, but the basic meaning will be the same. Exodus 19:4-6 means the book of Exodus, chapter 19, verses 4 to 6.

Their destiny is clearly described in that phrase, "a kingdom of priests". The Jews were not all priests of course, but they had a priestly work to do.

A priest stands between God and the people. His work is to teach them true worship and to bring them to God. He also gives God's blessing to the people. The Jews were to stand between God and the other nations. Their job was to teach those nations. In this sense they were priests. They were to turn the nations from their idols to the true God. Then God would bless them as He promised Abraham.

The nation was unfaithful in this calling. Instead of bringing other nations to God, Israel went to the other nations. They copied their idols. They became like them. Eventually God let them go to those nations. He scattered them all over the world. Though He was patient with them, He had at last to reject them for a time. Yet His purpose cannot be defeated, as we shall see.

The family of Levi was chosen to be the priests for Israel themselves. The book of Leviticus is about the priesthood. It tells of the sacrifices that Jews had to offer and the feasts they had to keep.

The book of Numbers is so called because it contains two numberings of the nation. The first census was taken when they came out of Egypt. Then, through lack of faith, they failed to enter the land God had promised them. Therefore they were forced to wander in the wilderness. Forty years they spent there. Numbers tells of their wanderings. The doubters died there.

It is a tragic story. The people who had come from Egypt were now condemned to death through their unbelief. They wandered around without any destination. Life had no purpose now. They were just passing the time, waiting to die. Life is like that for many people today. They have no real aim in life. Without God, life has no meaning. Such people are just filling in the time between the cradle and the grave.

God's purpose now lay with the children of those unbelievers. Numbers contains a second census of the new generation.

Moses' Reminder

Deuteronomy is a second reading of the law. Moses gives a brief history of the nation, their failures and hopes. In his last speech before his death, he urges them on in faith. He outlines blessings and curses which witness against them in their later history. Many of the prophets use this book to warn the nation.

Here are some interesting verses. They dramatically reflect the experiences of the Israeli nation. They speak of Jews suffering as they did in the concentration camps of Europe this century. They show how remarkably accurate is our Bible and how up to date:-

"And you shall become an astonishment, a proverb, and a byword among all nations where the LORD will lead you ... And among those nations you shall find no rest, nor shall the sole of your foot have a resting place; but there the LORD will give you a trembling heart, failing eyes, and anguish of soul. Your life shall hang in doubt before you; you shall fear day and night, and have no assurance of life. In the morning you shall say, 'Oh, that it were evening!' And at evening you shall say, 'Oh, that it were morning!' because of the fear which terrifies your heart, and because of the sight which your eyes see:"

(Deuteronomy 28:37, 65-67)

The period covered by Exodus to Deuteronomy is only 40 years. Israel's experience is valuable to us, however. The New Testament shows that we are to be warned by their history. Paul, the apostle, says it was written for our learning. Israel's experiences were examples to us. They show us what to do and what not to do. They help us to appreciate what God wants.

Here then is another part of the Bible that cannot be thrown away or ignored. It is important to the true Christian. It is another essential part of the God-given guide.

CHAPTER 5

SALLY and Debbie were nice enough girls, but they liked to tease each other. During the period I worked with them they would often write cheques for one another. Debbie would make out a cheque to Sally for £100,000, or perhaps even £1m.

It was all a huge joke. Neither of them had that sort of money. The cheques were never presented of course. Even if they had been, they would have bounced. There was no possibility that they would ever have been paid. For those girls, and for many of us, cheques for that sort of sum mean nothing. They are a promise that cannot be honoured.

Promises, Promises

Today, men and women make promises very lightly. Politicians, for example, may promise all kinds of things before an election. For one reason and another, many of those promises do not materialise. Broken promises breed cynicism. People become distrustful of the word of others.

God's promises are not like that. God is well able to fulfil all that He has promised. He is all mighty to ensure that His word will be honoured. It will come true.

God did not just feed and care for a whole nation in the wilderness. He brought them to the land He had promised. He was as good as His word. As we saw in Numbers, His chosen people did not believe His promise. Even with the best evidence of God's faithfulness around them, they were not faithful. They were afraid of the nations there. They could not accept that God would help them overcome their enemies.

That generation died. Yet God, true to His word, gave the land to their children. Here is His explanation of why He was still prepared to keep His word:-

"Do not think in your heart, after the LORD your God has cast them (the nations) out before you, saying, 'Because of my righteousness the LORD has brought me in to possess this land'; but it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is driving them out from before you. It is not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart that you go in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD your God drives them out from before you, and that he may fulfil the word which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Therefore understand that the LORD your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness, for you are a stiff-necked people."

(Deuteronomy 9:4-6)

Over Jordan

Joshua was the successor to Moses. He was the one who led the nation across the River Jordan and into the land. The book of Joshua is the story of the conquest of the land which God gave them. God fought their battles and Israel possessed the land. Joshua also shows how the land was divided up between the twelve tribes.

The land was called Canaan. It was the land to which Abraham came. It was the land God had promised his descendants would have. In more recent times it has been known as Palestine. Today, it is called Israel. Its boundaries have not always remained exactly the same. In the main, however, it has been the same narrow strip of land between the continents. It is the bridge between Africa, Asia and Europe. It is a very small country. Yet God has called it the centre of the earth, His land. He chose it as a place for His name.

It is clear from the verses quoted above that Israel's success in the land lay partly in their own hands. It depended to a large extent on their obedience to God's commands.

God Sent Judges

Judges shows the apathy of the nation towards God. The land had been conquered and shared out between the families. God had enabled them to settle the land. Yet other nations still lived there as

well. Little pockets of resistance remained. They were a means of testing the determination of the nation of Israel.

After the death of Joshua, things began to go wrong. Without the promptings of a leader the nation forgot God. They forgot that they were His people, and neglected their responsibilities to Him.

Those little pockets of resistance then grew. God allowed those nations that were left to become strong. One by one they began to create problems for Israel. Under pressure the nation realised its faults. The people turned again to God to help them. And He did. He chose a leader through whom He delivered the nation. Such leaders were known as the Judges. The word also means Deliverer or Saviour.

Once again these things are of importance to the true Christian. Each of these judges reflects an aspect of the Godly life. They help us to understand the work of our Saviour, Jesus Christ.

The tragedy of the Judges is that Israel did not learn her lesson. Saved by one judge, the people soon forgot and again drifted away from God. Again they sinned. Again He allowed another nation to oppress them. Again they were sorry and repented. God heard them and provided another leader to deliver them.

And so the cycle continued, round and round.

It shows that the nation was not sorry enough. When they turned over a new leaf, it lasted only a few years. Within a fairly short time they had forgotten. This suggests that they were really only sorry that they were being punished. They were not truly sorry for letting God down.

Sin is disobeying God. It means not just the great big things that hit the news. It includes little things as well. We are all guilty of sin. Repentance means being sorry and turning away from sin. It is no use just being sorry that our sins get us into trouble or difficulty. Repentance is being sorry to God, sorry that we have not kept His ways.

Throughout the period of the judges, Israel drifted further away from God. They moved a little further from His ways each time they sinned. Slowly, His laws and values began to disappear from their minds. A man's own conscience became his guide. His behaviour could rise no higher than his own expectations. The Bible says that "everyone did what was right in his own eyes".

The time covered by the books of Joshua and Judges was approximately 450 years.

A Love Story

The little book of Ruth takes place within the time of the Judges. It is the story of the faith in God of a non-Jew. The Bible calls such people Gentiles. The story shows an Israelite family's lack of faith in leaving God's land. It compares this with Ruth's faith. She was a Moabitess, yet she wanted to belong to God and His land. Ruth eventually married a Jew. She became an ancestor of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Samuel - Judge and Prophet

Samuel was both a judge and a prophet. He did a lot to weld the nation of Israel together again. They had become disunited since the days of Joshua. They were just a collection of tribes. Samuel did much to make them one again and bring them back to God.

It should not be imagined that the whole nation became Godly again, however. Many had forgotten God's words (including the ones quoted from Exodus in our previous chapter). They had forgotten the covenant God had made. They had forgotten that they were God's kingdom.

The First King of Israel

They approached Samuel and asked him to appoint a king. Samuel was upset. God was their King. In wanting to be more like the nations around them Israel were rejecting God. However, a king was appointed and reigned for forty years. He was king Saul. Details of his reign occupy most of the first book of Samuel (I Samuel).

God rejected Saul and his family for disobedience. His successor was David. He was the shepherd boy who became king. He also reigned for forty years. The second book of Samuel contains the story of his reign, ending just before the year 1,000 BC.

David was a man who loved God. He recognised that Israel were God's people. He did his best to shepherd and guide them for God. He drove other nations out from God's land. He set about removing idol worship. Jerusalem became the capital of God's kingdom. David also prepared a temple for the glory of God.

A Man After God's Heart

God loved David. He was called the man after God's own heart. That means that he identified with God. They both looked forward to the same things. God made promises to David as He had to Abraham. He promised that his son should be a king for ever on the throne in Jerusalem. We shall see what became of the promise later.

David died. His son Solomon became king. He built the temple which his father had prepared. He was a man to whom God gave extraordinary wisdom to rule Israel. Yet in his own way of life Solomon was often not wise. After his death the kingdom split into two. Solomon's son retained control of only two tribes. They were known as Judah. The remaining ten tribes of Israel formed a separate kingdom. They were called the kingdom of Israel. The details are to be found in the first book of Kings.

More Kings and Prophets

God sent prophets to warn the people and to turn them from their sin. Elijah demonstrated the power of God, but the nation continued to worship idols.

Elisha followed Elijah in speaking for God, but the kingdom of Israel grew worse. Other prophets were also sent to the people. In some cases we have a record of their message in the Old Testament books. Their work was largely without result. Very few responded.

At last there was no remedy for their sin. God brought the Assyrians against them to destroy the kingdom. Many of the people were killed. Others were taken away to torture or cruel slavery. A few of the poorest were left in the land.

Some of these refugees migrated south to the kingdom of Judah. The Assyrians transplanted other people into the land who intermarried with any who were left. In the time of Jesus these were known as Samaritans, a mixed race. They were hated by the Jews.

The second book of Kings relates the end of the kingdom of Israel. It also describes the history of the kingdom in Judah. Judah had some good kings. Men like Hezekiah and Josiah who loved God and were faithful. The kingdom also had bad kings, however. Eventually, it too was removed by the Babylonians.

The first and second books of Chronicles deal with the same period. They alternate between contemporary events in Israel and Judah. They contain information additional to the Kings record supplied perhaps from prophets of the time. Originally, there would be only one book of Chronicles. When books were written on scrolls, however, this would have taken two scrolls. The same is true of Samuel and Kings which also appear as two books in our Bibles.

In all these books there is a frankness which is almost alarming. They do not flatter the men whose stories they tell. They look at things from God's point of view. They speak of things that men would have tried to cover up or exaggerate. They deal with them in an open and honest way. This is because they are God's assessment of these men.

At junior school, history used to seem a very dull subject. It was all dates. It was hard to remember and there seemed little point in it.

At secondary school we did more social and economic history. That was more interesting. It was things like the history of canals, of railways, of the trade union movement and so on. It involved learning why things happened, why canals declined, why railways took over.

Bible history is like that. It is not a succession of dates, or even events. It is certainly not just Jewish history. It is how God's purpose was working out. It is why the Jews failed to become the most important nation on earth. It is why they could not stay in the land God gave them.

Captivity in Babylon

The people of Judah spent seventy years in Babylon from about 600 BC. The Babylonians were then defeated by the Medes and Persians. Under their rule the Jews were allowed to return to Jerusalem. They began to rebuild the city as God had promised they would. Under Ezra the scribe and Nehemiah the governor they resettled the area. The temple was also rebuilt. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell us about this.

Not all the Jews returned to Judah. Many were comfortable in captivity. The book of Esther, however, describes a persecution that arose in Persia. An ancient "Hitler" tried to wipe out the Jews. Esther, a Jewess who had become queen, saved her people. The wicked Haman's "final solution" came to nothing.

These events are of more than passing interest though. They show the power of God in working out what He has planned and foretold. The work of Esther teaches something of the work of the Lord Jesus Christ in saving his people.

That concludes this very brief survey of Israel's career. It takes us right through to the end of Old Testament history. The remaining books of poetry and prophecy fit into the same period.

CHAPTER 6

AS anyone who has learnt a foreign language will know, it is not enough simply to learn the words. To speak a language well you have to learn to think in that language. You have to know idiom, ideas, customs and practices.

I lived in Norway for two years. At the end of it my accent could sometimes be passed off for a native's. Yet I never really felt that I knew exactly how a Norwegian thinks. Different climate, backgrounds and environment make people different. There is more to nationality than just language.

That is why to Western ears Hebrew music and poetry often sound strange. Yet the poetry books of the Bible express truth for all mankind. They contain principles which everyone can appreciate as noble and beautiful. They apply to people of every nationality and every age.

Comforters?

The book of Job is an example. The events probably took place in the time of Genesis. It is the story of God testing a very faithful man. Job's friends are jealous of him. They attempt, unsuccessfully, to explain his troubles and to relate them to sin. Through his suffering they are taught the power and majesty of God. All are humbled by the experience.

Bible Hymns

The Psalms are a collection of works. They were written over a long period. Some are the work of Moses. Many are by David, some by Hezekiah and some by men who served David. Their usefulness lies in our being able to identify with some of their experiences. They contain beautiful expressions of praise and thanksgiving, or confidence and trust in God. Some are prayers of repentance. Some are prophecies. Many are a great source of comfort. Sometimes they are bound with the gospels, but they are better read with their Old Testament background.

Proverbs is also a collection. It is an assembly of wise sayings or parables. Some of our own everyday proverbs have their foundation here. They contain a lot of sound advice relevant to life today. They are also very practical. They help us understand true wisdom and lead a Godly life.

Wise Words

In the book of Ecclesiastes, a wise king examines life's purpose. This is a question that has beaten some of the best brains! Even people highly trained and qualified in different subjects find this hard. Yet this is surely one of the most basic of all questions.

What is life about? Why are we here? What is the purpose of our existence? These are things that brains trusts and panels find difficult. Yet here is something fundamental. This we need to know if we are to make anything of our lives.

The author of Ecclesiastes sees that many things go in cycles. They seem empty and a waste of time. But he discovers that everything has a time and place in God's plan. His conclusions are sound and helpful.

King Solomon wrote 1,005 songs. The Song of Songs is the best or most important of his works. It depicts many human feelings - love, temptation, disappointment, loyalty. It describes the love and unity that should exist between God and His people. It is also known as the Song of Solomon.

It teaches us to question our priorities. What do I love most? My family? My work? Some particular possession? What is it that finds first place in our hearts and our lives? And, is it right that it should?

These are the poetry books of our Bible. They are not always easy reading. Sometimes they contain searching questions. Yet they are also a source of counsel, wisdom and strength. They are as true today as when they were first written.

CHAPTER 7

ALMOST every newspaper in Britain runs a horoscope. The information about the stars is not put there to fill space. Clearly the editors believe it is essential if they are to promote sales. That means that there are a lot of people interested in the future - their future at least.

Of the several people I work with, all know their birth sign. Most of them look at what the stars say. Some check it out daily, some less frequently.

Some take it very seriously. Others treat it as a bit of fun. They know that consulting a different paper or journal would result in a different reading of the future. Most keep half an eye open for the forecast coming true, however.

And a lot of it never does.

The nation of Israel were forbidden to dabble in fortune telling or the occult. Witches, wizards and those who claimed to read the future were not allowed to live under God's law.

This was because no-one really knows the future but God. In our hearts most of us recognise this. Even the weather forecasters don't always get it right from day to day. But human nature likes to pretend. Some feel more secure in thinking they know what tomorrow holds. Some are made very frightened by the prospect of things that may never happen at all.

Prophets From God

The prophets of our Old Testament were not like fortune tellers. They were men sent from God. They were compelled by His power to present His message. Where that message concerned the future, it was part of God's purpose, certain of fulfilment.

God alone knows the future. In fact, He lives in the past, the present and the future. Our finite minds cannot understand His eternity. He makes history happen. If we had a time machine and could be transported into the future, God would be there too. Whatever point in time we live or consider, He is there.

The work of the prophets was to encourage the people to worship God and keep His law. They did not only speak of the future. They warned of God's judgments if the people were wicked. They promised prosperity if the nation turned to Him in obedience. In this way the future became part of their message. It was dark with punishment or bright with blessings.

The line of prophets goes back in Jewish history further than the kings. Prophets were appointed by God. Kings were requested by the people. The prophets were ordinary men from different walks of

life. Prophesying was not always their main occupation. God moved them to speak His word at times. At others, they appear to have lived a normal life.

Because the message is God's, however, it is timeless. It is not restricted to those who first heard it spoken. Its truth is capable of more than one fulfilment. That means that it may come true again and again in different circumstances. It may therefore be relevant to today. In fact, there is good reason to believe that some of these Scriptures are being fulfilled now. Some even apply to tomorrow.

There were sometimes false prophets as well as true ones. God gave certain tests to help distinguish them. Test one was whether or not a prophecy came true. If it did not, then no notice was to be taken of that prophet. God had not sent him.

It did not always mean that a prophet was from God because he was right about something. If a prophecy did come true a second test came into operation. The second test was whether or not his message coincided with the rest of God's word. If it did not his message was false. Only if what he said agreed with the laws God had previously given was he to be obeyed.

Even today we should judge the things we hear by the Bible. The Bible is the yardstick. Unless a teaching agrees with the word of God, it must be rejected.

Moses was a true prophet. So was Samuel. Elijah and his successor Elisha are well known too. The summary below lists only the prophetic books of our Old Testament.

Prophets Major

Isaiah seems to have had ready access to the royal court. He prophesied to the southern kingdom of Judah. His prophecies contain a lot of detail about the Messiah and his kingdom. For example, chapter seven contains a famous passage about the virgin birth. Chapter eleven presents a picture of the peace of the kingdom of God. Chapter 53 speaks of the sufferings of Jesus Christ.

Jeremiah came later in the history of Judah. He began his work near the end of the kingdom. He warned of its decline and of the captivity. Consequently he has a reputation for woe. He was himself a man of faith and hope despite all he suffered. He spoke also of the restoration of the Jews. We can see the accuracy with which his inspired prophecies were fulfilled.

Seeing the fall of Jerusalem was heartbreaking. Jeremiah wrote his lament poetically. He writes as though he is the city now ruined and destroyed. These are the Lamentations of Jeremiah, inspired by God.

Ezekiel was from a priestly family. He was one of those taken captive. He lived and preached among the Jews who had been carried off in an early assault on Jerusalem. He spoke of current events and of things far future. He foretold the destruction of the important city of Tyre. He also prophesied the re-gathering of the Jews after they had been scattered in all countries. The re-establishment of the State of Israel in this century is a fulfilment of God's word through Ezekiel.

He spoke of an alliance between Persia, Ethiopia and Libya and a mighty northern power. He prophesied an invasion of Israel by these forces which has not yet taken place. He said that the invading forces would eventually be beaten. By this God's power would be known to all. He related a vision of a temple not yet built and the future importance of Jerusalem. This is consistent with what God promised David.

Daniel also lived in exile, but rose to a position of importance. Part of his prophecy has to do with world empires and events affecting the land of Israel. Chapter two describes a metallic image where each metal represents a world power. It depicts the succession of these powers and has since happened in history. We now live in the period related to the feet and toes of the image. No single power has world domination and there is no cohesion among the nations.

The end of the prophecy is of a stone smashing the whole image to pieces and replacing it. This stone, the prophet says, stands for the kingdom of God which is to replace present systems of government. It will not itself be destroyed or replaced.

The way in which these claims relate to our own day cannot be ignored. Many prefer to doubt or dispute them, but they deserve consideration at least.

Prophets Minor

Twelve “minor” prophets make up the rest of the Old Testament. This does not mean that they are less important than other books. The term is given simply because these prophecies are all shorter than the four already mentioned. Briefly, these are set out below.

Hosea was sent to the kingdom of Israel in the north. He was to condemn their wickedness before it became beyond remedy. Hosea’s wife was unfaithful to him. Through his attempts to win her back, he understood how Israel had become unfaithful to God. He showed the nation how much God loved and wanted them back.

Joel’s prophecy was based on a plague of locusts. He likens them to an army. He describes God’s future judgments on the nation of Israel. He spoke of a final conflict, yet to come, involving all nations.

Amos came from Judah. He prophesied of God’s judgments on Israel and other nations around. He showed that the judgments were not just punishment. They were sent to help Israel see the need to turn back to God.

Obadiah’s short prophecy was directed against Edom. Edom was the nation descended from Esau, Jacob’s brother. The prophecy was because of Edom’s cruelty towards Israel. The same hatred exists in the Middle East today between the same “brother” nations, between Israel and its Arab neighbours.

Jonah was sent to the Assyrian capital, Nineveh. At first he refused to go. He would have drowned if God had not saved him by the “whale”. After that, he repented and obeyed God. The Ninevites repented too. Later, however, they returned to their wickedness. God used them to punish Israel, but afterwards the Assyrians were themselves destroyed.

Micah lived at about the same time as Isaiah. He preached to the people of Judah. During his life the northern kingdom of Israel was destroyed. He presented a message of hope, therefore, to king Hezekiah in the south. If his kingdom would obey God, they would far better than Israel. Micah is the prophet who named Bethlehem as the birthplace of the Messiah.

Like Jonah, Nahum prophesied against Nineveh. His prophecy was probably later than Jonah. He foretold the nation’s destruction at the hands of Babylon.

The prophet Habakkuk was sent to Judah about 100 years after Isaiah and Micah. He warned that God would punish their sin as He had punished Israel. God showed him how men of faith could be saved. Habakkuk gladly believed and accepted this.

Zephaniah, like Habakkuk, prophesied near the end of the kingdom of Judah. His name means “watchman”. He spoke of the judgments that God told him were coming.

Haggai was a prophet who lived after Judah’s captivity. He returned from Babylon and helped to rebuild Jerusalem. People had stopped building the temple because of difficulties. They were busy with their own lives and houses. Haggai warned them of the need to put God first.

Zechariah also belongs to this period. He is mentioned with Haggai in the book of Nehemiah. His visions encouraged the people in their work. He spoke of a glorious future for the whole nation of Israel in the purpose of God.

Later still, Malachi spoke to those who had returned to the land. He warned them about relapsing into evil ways. He showed the importance of worshipping God in the right way.

The period of history covered by the kingdoms of Israel and Judah totals 5-600 years. The captivity of Judah lasted 70 years. Malachi prophesied a little less than 400 years before the birth of Jesus.

CHAPTER 8

I WORKED for a while with a firm of civil engineers. There were many jobs during the years that I was with them, but one contract outlasted all others. It was work at a town on the north east coast.

The contract was for rebuilding breakwaters and fortifying the sea wall. As the coast was constantly being eroded, the defences against the sea had to be good. It was a risky business too. If a machine became bogged down in the sand, it could easily be claimed by the tide and lost.

The disappointing part about the work was that there was so little to see. Most of the work was underground and out of sight. Pile driving had to be very deep. Several feet of sand had to be gone through to find clay and, beneath that, rock. Failure to get down to something firm would mean disaster.

Sure Foundations

But there was so little to show for our effort. I have no doubt that many passersby thought we were doing little or nothing. Yet those strong foundations, the piles, the tons of concrete, all hidden from view, were the most important part of the job.

Much the same is true of the Bible. So many people begin reading at the gospels. Yet they are the superstructure. The foundation of the Old Testament is vitally important. Indeed the New Testament cannot properly be understood without it. Its ability to help and save us depends on what has gone before. Its opening words take us straight back to the Old Testament:-

“The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.”

(Matthew 1:1)

Unless we have worked hard at the foundations, we shall be on unfamiliar ground. Worse, we shall not see the importance of the gospel writers' message.

Of course, we should be just as foolish to read the Old Testament and to stop there. That would be like putting in all the footings and not bothering to build a wall. The Old Testament leads up to the New. It makes little sense without Christ.

The New Testament claims to be the word of God just like the Old Testament. The apostles of Jesus wrote as they were moved to write by the Spirit of God. History again determined which documents have been preserved, but God controls history. The books which make up our Scriptures are those which God has seen fit to preserve.

At the end of the 4th Century a Church Council met at Carthage. It officially confirmed the “canon” of Scripture. The word canon here means a rule or standard. The Bible is the unalterable rule of faith. In reality, however, the books were already regarded as the holy word of God. The Council simply accepted formally the catalogue of books then in use.

Like the Old Testament, the New Testament can be broken down into three sub-groups. The Gospels and Acts are the history books. Romans to Jude are all letters. Some were open letters and some personal. The book of Revelation is sometimes called the Apocalypse. It is a book of symbol and prophecy.

The word “Gospel” was once Gods-spel, which meant God's story. That is what the Bible is. Today the word means the good news. The good news concerns Jesus Christ. It is the good news about the forgiveness of sins and being saved from death. It is also the good news of a kingdom which Jesus himself preached.

This “gospel” was preached to Abraham centuries before Jesus was born. When the word gospel is used today, however, it is usually with another meaning. It refers to the four books which are especially about the life and work of Jesus. These are Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

Four Gospels

Matthew, one of the twelve disciples, writes for the Jews. His purpose seems to have been to show that Jesus came to be King of the Jews. He makes many references to the Old Testament to show that Jesus fulfilled the prophecies. He is the Messiah.

Mark seems to have been a young man who lived in Jerusalem. He was a disciple of Jesus, but not one of the twelve closest. His gospel is the shortest. It may also have been the first to be written. Mark supplies many interesting little details about the incidents he relates.

Luke was a doctor. He writes about Jesus from another point of view. He would be especially interested in the healing work of Jesus and writes about him as the Saviour.

John concentrates his story on Jesus as the Son of God and the glory of God. He is much more concerned with the spiritual nature of Jesus' teaching. His gospel contains many things of deep and hidden significance.

Together the four gospels present the work of our Lord Jesus Christ. They begin with the way in which his coming fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies. His birth had been anticipated in the word of God. He is God's Son.

Jesus was born by a miracle. He was the son of a virgin through the power of God. He was brought up in a Jewish household in northern Israel.

He began his work at about the age of thirty when he was baptised. All through his life he resisted temptation and sin. He devoted himself completely and utterly to doing the will of God in everything. God blessed him with great power for preaching and working miracles.

Jesus was the rightful heir to the kingdom of God and to the royal throne of David. Yet he sought to save men and women by humble service. He was rejected by his own people and cruelly crucified. Jesus accepted this, making himself a sacrifice for the sins of men and women. Through his death God grants the forgiveness of sins of those who believe in Christ.

After three days in the tomb Jesus was raised to life again by God. He appeared to many before ascending to heaven. There he awaits the time when God will send him back with almighty power as the Gospels promise.

A Young Church at Work

The Acts of the Apostles is a record of what happened after Jesus had gone into heaven. It is really the acts, or work, of Jesus carried on by his apostles. They received his power of the Holy Spirit to help them.

First the church was established at Jerusalem. Then the gospel was preached in other places. Slowly it spread out like ripples on a pond. Peter and John preached in Judaea. Philip and others took the gospel to Samaria. Then the work spread into Asia and all the world. Peter "opened the door" to the Gentiles when he preached to Cornelius. Paul became the "apostle to the Gentiles" and made several missionary journeys to the Gentile world.

CHAPTER 9

A FRIEND was telling us about her new job as a saleslady.

She had drawn up at the house she was to visit and sat in the car preparing for her first call. She had to ask the lady of the house if she might show her a catalogue for just five minutes.

In her heart she wasn't happy about this. She knew very well that, once inside, her visit would take at least thirty minutes. As a housewife herself, she also knew how hard it was to spare that time from a morning's routine. As she left the car and walked up the garden path, she felt quite guilty.

Needless to say, she didn't last long at the job. After only a few days she realised that she was not cut out for it. She gave it up.

One of the first requirements of salespeople is that they must believe in their product. If they are not convinced themselves, they are not likely to convince others. They need to be persuaded that they are doing a good job. Otherwise they will not be persuasive.

Total conviction is what emerges from the writings of the apostle Paul. He was not selling the gospel, of course, but he did have a firm belief in what he preached. He was fully committed to living it in his own life.

Letters to Believers

He had begun his career violently opposed to the gospel. He had spoken against Christianity. He had accused and persecuted believers. It was the fact that the risen Jesus had appeared to Paul that changed his life. There was no denying the fact - Jesus was alive. He had spoken to him. With that he could not argue. Whatever he might suffer he had to do what was right. He would be branded a turncoat, but he must live by his firm conviction. He must tell people about the living Jesus.

To the Romans Paul describes his feelings like this:-

"I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation to everyone who believes ..."

(Romans 1:16)

This letter was written before Paul visited Rome. He wrote to show that all men and women are sinners and need God's help. Salvation is possible for anyone through faith in Jesus. He has shown the righteousness and the mercy of God.

Paul wrote two letters to the Corinthians. The first letter deals with many problems which existed in the church at Corinth. It gives advice on questions about marriage, immorality, law suits, unity within the church, charity, and life after death.

Paul had earlier spent two years at Corinth. He would know many of the people there personally. Some, however, seemed to have challenged his authority to give advice. He wrote his second letter to remind them that God had made him an apostle. He warned those who were arrogant. He encouraged the rest to do what was right.

Paul wrote to the Galatians about a different sort of problem. Many of the believers there were turning back to the Law of Moses. They had become Christians. Then Jews had begun to persuade them to keep the old law as well. Paul's letter showed how Christ had fulfilled the law. He showed that Gentiles could now share in God's covenant through Christ. No-one can earn eternal life through the law. God requires faith.

Paul had also lived in Ephesus for two years. He was forced to leave after a riot about the goddess Diana. However, the letter to the Ephesians was not about problems. It is about how to live the Christian life. It is about unity. It has good advice for families. The church is also a family.

A prison warder and a rich businesswoman were among the converts at Philippi. The Philippian were a great help to Paul when he was in prison in Rome. They sent him gifts. He wrote to thank them for their kindness and to strengthen their faith.

The letter to the Colossians was also written from Rome. It warns the brethren not to be led astray by the teachings of men. It shows the need to put our old life behind us and to live for Christ.

Paul had left Thessalonica hurriedly due to persecution of the brethren there. From Athens he sent Timothy back to help the church. Timothy's good report resulted in this letter from Paul. He was glad to learn of their faith. He wrote about the second coming of Jesus, about resurrection and the judgment.

A second letter to the Thessalonians quickly followed the first. Perhaps there had been some misunderstanding of what he wrote. In this letter he warns of temptations and a "man of sin". He urges them not to be idle in waiting for Christ. They need to be on their guard against sin and persecution.

Timothy was a young man who was a great help to Paul. He had been left in charge of the church at Ephesus. Paul wrote this personal letter to him. It gives advice on how he was to deal with his duties and problems.

Paul's second letter to Timothy was written much later. It comes after Paul had been released from two years imprisonment. It was written very shortly before his death. It shows his wonderful courage and trust in God in every situation. It also warns Timothy that difficult times would precede the return of Jesus.

Titus had the difficult job of looking after the church in Crete. Paul's letter to him contains instructions for the discipline and organisation of the church. The advice is good for today too.

Onesimus, a slave to a man named Philemon, had apparently run away. Later he was converted. Paul, in sending him back to his master, writes this personal note. He asks Philemon to accept Onesimus back without punishment. He is now not only a servant of Philemon, but also of Jesus Christ.

The letter to the Hebrews, written to Jewish Christians, shows how Jesus had fulfilled the law of Moses. Things of the Old Covenant pointed forward to Jesus. He was a "better" sacrifice than the sacrifices of the Old Testament. He was a "better" priest than those priests. His work alone is able to take away our sins and bring us back to God.

More Letters

James wrote a very practical little letter. It is full of simple advice for the follower of Jesus. He warns to beware of strife, pride, lust, presumption, riches and an unruly tongue. He speaks of the need to have a working faith, a faith in action.

Peter wrote his letters in difficult times. He warns of how the faith of believers was to be tested. The last part of the letter (from 4:12) is almost like a post script. Some have suggested that it was added because serious persecution of Christians had begun in Rome.

Peter wrote again shortly before his own death. He was anxious about false brethren and their attacks on the church. He wanted to be sure that the Christians would remain firm despite their faith being ridiculed.

John had been one of the closest disciples of Jesus. He was also aware of the dangers facing the Christians. He was concerned about false ideas and corrupt practices which were creeping into the church. He called this opposition "antichrist". His letter speaks of truth and reassures the believers of God's unfailing love.

John wrote two further letters. They were short personal letters. They were written to show that those who walk in truth and show God's love are the children of God.

Jude says that he found it necessary to write urgently about the spread of corrupt teaching and immorality. He too was concerned about the Christians being under pressure. He urged them to hold on to the teaching of Christ and to be faithful in the lives they lived.

That completes our brief survey of the letters, or epistles, of the New Testament. Paul, James, Peter, John and Jude all wrote from a perfect understanding of the teachings of Jesus. Their guidance is vitally important to our own understanding and way of life.

A Book From Jesus

The book of Revelation is not really a letter, but a prophecy. Its message was sent to seven churches in Asia Minor. Revelation means "appearing". The book is about the second coming of Jesus and the events which lead up to it. It offers a blessing to those who read and try to prepare themselves for that great day. The book is a series of visions given by Jesus to John while he was imprisoned on the island of Patmos. The symbolism of the book is not always easy to understand. It refers to many other parts of Scripture. Sometimes this book is called the Apocalypse.

The Bible concludes with a warning about those who add to or take away from its message. In practice, however, this warning is often ignored. So many people say they believe the Bible. On closer questioning, however, they do not accept "this". They feel "that" is not inspired. They cannot see that "the other" is important.

Others also claim to accept the Bible. They accept other writings as inspired too. They accord as much respect to contemporary writers. They believe that they also are inspired. They put their work on a par with the Bible.

The Bible is unique. It alone is the word of God. It is inspired by Him, wholly true. All of it is His message, vital for our salvation. It is a complete guide. It contains all we need to be able to please and honour God.

CHAPTER 10

THE diesel and electric trains can never quite replace the old steam engines for fascination. I spent many hours by the railway line as a boy. I would be ticking off numbers and noting the different wheel configurations. Double-headers (two engines pulling one train) were always a bonus to see.

I saw the “Caledonian” on its record-breaking run. I once told the signalman about some trouble I noticed in a carriage wheel of the “Royal Scot”. The train had to be stopped further up the line and the carriage taken off. That was a proud day.

People like to claim an association with something out of the ordinary. They like to be able to say they know someone famous. To claim acquaintance with a film star or athlete sounds good. It immediately promotes a person in the eyes of others. To know their village or their family commands respect in certain company. What are they really like? Are they as ordinary as the rest of us? Do they behave the same in private as in public? What intimate details of their lives can be learned?

Of course, there can be times when someone you know is disgraced. No doubt it is wise to be silent about any acquaintance with them then!

Friends of Jesus

The twelve disciples had an intimate knowledge of the ways of Jesus. For almost three and a half years they lived in his company. Often they seemed to fail him. Yet he was grateful for their help. He said they had stayed with him through all his trials.

It would be nice to be a close friend of Jesus when he was welcomed by people. Jesus healed many sick people who would be excited and grateful. The disciples then would be pleased that they were associated with him.

Soon, however, there came a time when to know Jesus was dangerous. At his arrest they all forsook him and fled. At his trial Peter denied him. After his death they most probably went into hiding out of everyone's way.

Then, suddenly, after Jesus had ascended into heaven, they were in Jerusalem again. They were busy preaching about the Jesus they knew and loved. They were successful, too. Even their enemies said they had turned the world upside down in their work.

The change in these men was unbelievable. Timidity had become courage. Fear had given way to an amazing boldness. Imprisonment could not confine their message. Even threats of persecution made no difference. Their work could not be halted.

Men do not behave like this without reason. They have to be very thoroughly committed to their cause. They need to be fully convinced of what they do before they are prepared to suffer for it. Clearly the disciples, once so afraid, were now totally convinced. They believed enough to hazard their lives for this. Some of them were killed rather than give up speaking about Jesus.

This tells us a lot about their message. It shows that they regarded it as highly important. It also proves that they believed it to be true. They would not have suffered for something they knew to be false.

For us, centuries later, it's easy to imagine that the disciples could have been wrong. Perhaps they were genuinely mistaken about some things? Maybe some reports were exaggerated? Could the disciples even have embroidered the stories to push forward their work?

They Wrote The Gospels

No! Such suggestions do not fit. Men would not willingly die for that. In fact, Jesus promised that they should have his help in recalling the picture accurately. The Holy Spirit would guide them to an exact reconstruction of events. Here are the words:-

“But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you.”

(John 14:26)

“However, when he, the Spirit of truth, has come, he will guide you into all truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak; and he will tell you things to come.”

(John 16:13)

These words are not true only for the disciples. They are true of the gospel writers too. Two of the writers were disciples anyway. Matthew Levi and John were two of the twelve men closest to Jesus. They had an intimate knowledge of the story they tell. Two were not. Mark was probably John Mark, a young man mentioned in the gospel story. If so, he must often have been present to hear Jesus' teaching and to see his work.

A Doctor With a Mission

Little is known about Luke. He was a doctor and seems to have written the book of Acts as well. He accompanied Paul on missionary visits. His gospel was written for an important man, perhaps a governor, called Most Excellent Theophilus. He begins by saying that he too was absolutely sure of his facts:-

“Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which are most surely believed among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed.”

(Luke 1:1-4)

If we accept this testimony we accept the gospels as true. If we accept Jesus' promise that his spirit would guide them, there can be no errors. It is popular to disregard this important evidence. Many like to point out that the gospel accounts were not written immediately. The stories must have been passed on by word of mouth. Each one hearing something would add his own little bit.

Anyone who has ever played the party game of passing on a message will know the truth of this. Whispering from one to another quickly leads to confusion and misunderstanding. The end message often bears no relationship to the one that started the game. The story becomes embellished and distorted in a funny way. It sounds very plausible when applied to the Bible too.

However, it ignores all the evidence. In the first place, there is good reason as shown above for believing that this did not happen. The holy spirit guided these men to record only what was true. It helped them to remember perfectly so that no mistakes were made. Not even inadvertently could any error have crept in.

Four Witnesses - One Story

Secondly, the four gospels do not each tell a different story. They generally agree in the records they present. Indeed, the harmony between them would be very surprising if they had been written from memory only. There are minor differences in the way issues are related. Any apparent discrepancies can normally be resolved fairly easily.

It should be noted that the writers do not all set out to give a diary of Jesus' life. They assemble material and arrange it to suit the aim of their work. They do not always place events in order. Jesus must often have repeated parts of his preaching at various towns. Sometimes he slightly altered his message for different audiences. This could also account for small differences between the gospels.

The gospel writers had nothing to gain in what they wrote. They had a great deal to lose. We may therefore safely depend on their work as true. The gospels are a very reliable account of the ministry of Jesus Christ.

The book of Acts was for a long time criticised by scholars. It was felt to be inaccurate in some of its detail. One example of this was the word used by the author to describe the rulers of Thessalonica.

This city was visited by Paul when Luke was with him. Luke calls the men in charge "Politarchs". The word is translated "rulers" in most English Bibles. This word does not seem to have been in use in other places. Experts felt that Luke had made a mistake or had made this up.

Subsequent discoveries proved the writer right! Pillars at Thessalonica since discovered by archaeologists use this same word. On them are inscribed the names of some of the politarchs. Luke knew his stuff! He was there. He had first hand information as he claimed. Acts too is a reliable history book.

What about the Old Testament, though? Surely there must be room for error in records which date back so far? How can we be certain that these histories have not been coloured by national prejudice or forgetfulness? Wouldn't inaccuracies result from the repeated hand copying of Bible manuscripts?

The Bible Weathers The Storm

Criticisms of this kind were very fashionable a few years ago. The assumption was often made that the Bible couldn't be right. With a superiority unbecoming to men without proof, scholars claimed they knew better.

Many of their attacks have not stood the test of time. The spade of the archaeologist has often proved them wrong. Fresh discoveries have justified the Bible. Yet the damage done by such criticism has never been fully repaired. Such criticism undermined faith in the Scriptures which for many has never been restored. It has left a hangover of suspicion. Today the average man and woman feel that the Bible cannot be true.

This is sad and unfair. There are plenty of things we may not understand. There are some we cannot yet explain. But there is nothing that has proved the Bible to be untrustworthy.

It is always tempting to assume that we are wiser than past generations. Certainly there have been many technical advances in our day which were undreamed of by our great grandfathers. But we should not be too hasty to make assumptions about the ignorance of others.

For example, it used to be thought that writing would be unknown to Abraham who lived around 2000 BC. For a long time, no writing as early as that was known. Scholars claimed that this cast doubts on the first books of our Bible. They were written by Moses much later and must have relied on hearsay. No written records would have existed.

This ignores the fact that the words are God's. He guided Moses. Even when no man was around at creation, God knows exactly what took place. If we accept that the Bible is God's book, we shall believe that it is right.

Written in Clay

In any case, the theories about writing have also now been shown to be in doubt. Important discoveries in 1976 at a city once called Ebla show their weakness. It had been thought that Sumerian was the oldest known language. However, the language on thousands of clay tablets at Ebla is very like Hebrew. The tablets also contain Sumerian writing and many other languages.

The Sumerian is an early semi-pictorial form of language. However, the Hebrew-type language is far more developed. It is known as a syllabic cuneiform script. These clay tablets date to just before the time of Abraham. They prove that writing was possible prior to the days of Abraham. They also prove that it was a more advanced kind of writing than had been imagined.

Criticisms have been levelled against the Book of Daniel similar to those about Luke and Acts. These too have been shown to be unfounded. What is now known of those times tends again to show that the Bible was right all the time.

At one stage it was even doubted that Babylon ever existed. It is a city mentioned many times in the Bible, but it had never been located. Unlike Jerusalem or Egypt, Babylon was totally unknown. Was it pure fabrication, imagination of the writers run riot?

It is no surprise that Babylon's existence should be in doubt. God Himself had decreed that it would be destroyed AND never rebuilt:-

“It shall be inhabited no more for ever, Nor shall it be dwelt in from generation to generation. As God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah And their neighbouring cities,’ says the LORD, ‘So no-one shall reside there, Nor son of man dwell in it.”

(Jeremiah 50:39-40)

Now this is most unusual. Most cities are built again on top of their old sites. Babylon was not:

Today its whereabouts are known. Some details of its former glory have been gleaned from the works of historians. We now know a little about its fortifications. We know that a chariot and four horses could turn on the top of them. We know a little about its hanging gardens, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. From what has been dug up we may piece together something of the days when it throbbed with life. But there is no city to visit. There is only a spot in the desert where it once was.

Not only was the Bible correct in its mentions of Babylon. It very accurately predicted its destiny, too!

Carefully Copied

Despite such discoveries there remains a question mark in the minds of many about the Bible's accuracy. Before the invention of printing, scribes copied the manuscripts by hand. It was a laborious task. They took great care. They would count the letters per line and the lines per page. Their reverence for the word of God was such that they were anxious to make no mistakes. How successful they were was shown by the finding of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947.

A Cave at Qumran

Many are now familiar with the way in which they were discovered. An Arab boy idly tossing a stone into a cave near Qumran heard it break something. Investigation revealed stone jars in which were stored scrolls. Some of these scrolls were of books of our Old Testament.

The importance of this find is not so familiar to most people. It is this. Prior to this discovery, the oldest manuscripts from which the Bible could be translated were known as the Masoretic Text. They dated back only as far as 916 AD. That was almost a thousand years after the Lord Jesus Christ and around 1,500 years after many of the prophecies were first given.

The Dead Sea Scrolls are almost a thousand years older. They date back to about 100 BC. That means that they were in existence in the time of Jesus Christ. They were the Scriptures with which he was familiar.

Most important of all is the fact that these scrolls vary little from the Masoretic Text, The differences that do exist are minor. They do not generally alter the sense of the message. One thousand years of copying and handing down was suddenly put to the test. Yet the alterations that had occurred were few and of little consequence.

Recently I was reading through the preface of a modern translation of the Bible. It stated that the few manuscript differences there are should not be allowed to “overshadow the overwhelming agreement” there is between these ancient records.

The evidence is that we have a Bible we can rely on.

CHAPTER 11

I SUPPOSE all children go through a period of contrariness. We went through such a stage with our daughter. She argued with everything. Whatever was said, she would listen carefully and then begin, “Ah but ...!”. At one stage we even began to call her Arbut!

Perhaps you are thinking that some people never grow out of their argumentative stage! Certainly we humans display some very contrary attitudes at times.

For example, the Bible contains no commandment to remember the birth of Jesus. Yet every year, thousands of people in many lands keep Christmas, They regard it as celebrating Christ's birth.

On the other hand, Jesus gave a very clear command that his disciples should remember his death. He gave them bread and wine as symbols of his body and blood. "Do this in remembrance of me," he said. Yet far fewer people remember his death. Easter is much less celebrated than Christmas. Communion services are not regarded as especially important by the majority. Regular attendance at such occasions is made by a tiny minority.

Full of Contradictions

Some say that the Bible itself is full of contradictions. If pressed, they are often unable to supply examples. Yet the idea seems to exist that the Bible argues against itself. Nothing could be further from the truth. The internal harmony of this Book of Books would be utterly amazing if the author were human.

Of course, there are things which are sometimes hard to grasp. A great deal then depends on how we approach the Bible. If we come convinced that it is wrong, we may well find things to support that point of view. Preconceived opinions are easily fuelled. If, however, we come determined to let the Bible tell us, we shall find many a problem resolved.

It will be helpful to illustrate this with an example.

Written Over The Cross

One of the most common "contradictions" I have heard concerns the cross of Christ. Over it was placed a sign. It was the custom to put on such a sign the criminal's name and the charge against him.

Matthew's gospel says that: "They put up over his head the accusation written against him: This is Jesus, the King of the Jews."

Mark says: "The inscription of his accusation was written above: The King of the Jews".

Luke tells us: "an inscription was written over him in letters of Greek, Latin and Hebrew: This is the King of the Jews:"

The gospel of John says that: "The writing was: Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews:"

It is argued that these differences are considerable. If the gospels cannot be reconciled on the actual wording of a sign, we should not trust them. If their reports are only approximately true, they are not reliable. Inaccuracy here casts doubts on other things, it is said.

In Greek, Latin and Hebrew

That's a fair comment. We need to see if these differences can be reconciled or explained in any way. Luke's gospel provides a clue to a possible answer. He says that the inscription was written in three languages. Hebrew was the language of the Jews. Greek was the language used through most of the civilised world at that time in history. Latin was the language of the Romans who occupied Palestine at that period.

Perhaps this is the reason for the differences. There seems to be no doubt that Matthew wrote his gospel for the Jews. He often makes reference to the Jewish Scriptures, our Old Testament. He would probably relate what the Hebrew inscription said. Luke would more likely have translated the Greek since he wrote for non-Jews. His gospel explains the Jewish customs and Hebrew words for its readers. No doubt the inscription would vary slightly in its wording between the different languages. That may well be the solution to the discrepancies here.

Seeing The Invisible

There are other "contradictions" levelled against the Bible too. The New Testament says that no-one has seen God at any time (John 1:18). Other verses agree with this. They describe God as the one who alone has immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man can see. (1 Timothy 6:16). But didn't Jacob meet God? And what about Moses?

Jacob had spent much of his life fighting for what he wanted. He wrestled to get his own way many times. God taught him that it was not Jacob who had been successful. It is God who controls all things. Behind the scenes and unknown to Jacob, it was God who had blessed him all along.

To teach him this lesson, God sent an angel. It was the very night when Jacob was expecting to meet his brother Esau of whom he was afraid. They had parted on very bad terms a few years earlier. He met a man. Angels in the Bible often appeared as men. They have been mistaken for them. Perhaps Jacob thought it was Esau. He wrestled him.

By daybreak he knew it was no ordinary man. The angel touched the ligaments of his hip joint and made Jacob limp. Jacob said, "I have seen God face to face and my life is preserved" (Genesis 32:30). But this does not prove that Jacob had seen the face of God. Taken with the other Bible quotations above, it is clear that he did not. What he saw was an angel of God.

So it was with Moses. He had asked to see the glory of God. God's answer was consistent with the other passages we have mentioned:

"'You cannot see my face; for no man shall see me, and live.' And the LORD said, 'Here is a place by me, and you shall stand on the rock. So it shall be, while my glory passes by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock, and will cover you with my hand while I pass by. Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.'"

(Exodus 33:20-23)

This helps us in understanding another verse. God was silencing those jealous of Moses who thought they were as good. God said that Moses was His prophet and that He would speak face to face with him. Obviously this expression is not to be taken literally. In view of what we have said it must be a way of describing the intimacy between God and Moses. God spoke with him as a man speaks with his friend.

There are doubtless many more "contradictions" of which the Bible is supposed to be guilty. Some are not contradictions at all, but problems. Some are imagined. Some are easily resolved, others are more difficult.

These two that we have looked at are fairly representative. One is from the Old Testament and one from the New. They illustrate the point that, with willingness, the difficulties can be resolved. It is not necessary to regard such problems as insurmountable. It is not right to suggest that they prove the Bible untrue or unreliable. It is not wise to allow them to undermine our faith in the Bible.

The real difficulty is "Arbutt"! In this writer's experience, the "Ah but ..." is usually an excuse. It comes from those who are looking for a way out.

It is accepted that there are a few genuinely worried by things they cannot explain. There are some sincerely concerned by verses that do not seem to square with others. But most of those who talk to me about "contradictions" are not like that. They have realised that the Bible makes demands. They have begun to feel the obligation of admitting its claims. They are trying to run away and need reasons for doing so. They want to be able to blame the Bible for their unbelief.

CHAPTER 12

MORE than a thousand people jostled for the exits. Many appreciative murmurs were heard as to the excellence of the lecture. The speaker had clearly delighted his audience.

This was puzzling. It was plain that the lecturer had been in command of his subject. He was obviously a brilliant scholar and an able chap. Much of what he had said, however, had been beyond my grasp. His vocabulary left me wanting a dictionary. I could not keep up with some of his arguments.

I began to wonder about my own intelligence. Was I really so stupid? Had all these people been able to follow the lecture? Was I the only one left behind in my ignorance.

I questioned one or two about the evening. It quickly became apparent that I was not alone. Many of them had not understood it all either. In fact, some of those moving towards the doors were declaring their simplicity too. "Wasn't it good?" they said, "right over my head"!

It's a bit like the king's new clothes. Do you remember the children's song about the king's invisible suit? No-one wanted to look foolish by admitting they could not see it. It was the naivety of a little boy who revealed the truth that the king was in the nude!

It is sometimes like that with things scientific. No-one likes to admit their ignorance. Instead we look up in admiration to those better qualified. We respect the educated and feel sure they must be right. It sounds good even if it is over our heads!

Blind Chance

Sadly, all too often, it is true that many of us are "blinded with science". The nudity of the theories is not exposed. Evolution is such a theory. If carefully examined, it has little to recommend it. It is bankrupt for ideas in piecing together how our world might have come into existence.

It suggests that the world has developed by chance. Yet it leaves many gaps. It supposes a long line of coincidences leading from one sort of creature to another. Yet it is quite unable to account for the many links between them that do not exist.

Today's theories began life in Darwinism. That set out to provide an alternative to creation by God. It began from a standpoint of unbelief in Genesis. The theory has been built on from there.

Created or Evolved?

It has been bolstered up by various "finds", usually of parts of animals. The dating of these finds has cast doubts on a literal acceptance of Creation story. In disputing the idea of creation in six days, many have dismissed the complete story. That is called "throwing the baby out with the bathwater"!

From this vantage point evolution has been widely taught. It has often been presented as fact. It has found its way into schools and into the minds of schoolchildren. However, its acceptance by so many does not make it true. It is still theory.

The situation has been made worse by compromise. Well-meaning religious people have tried to meet the evolutionist half-way. They have suggested that God was the force who set in motion the process that others call evolution.

This will not do. It dilutes the simple teaching of the Bible. The things that God made did not develop gradually over thousands of years. Each one was a specially made creation.

Real Science

Science is good. The manipulation of scientific facts by biased unbelievers is not good. Science has at present no facts which disprove the Bible's claims.

Even from a common sense point of view evolution has nothing in its favour. I have a piano in my home. It works when someone presses the ivory keys. They, in turn, raise little wooden hammers covered with felt. These strike wires stretched tightly between metal pins on a sounding board. The wires have to be of different lengths and thicknesses in order to make all the various notes.

The piano did not come into existence by accident. It was carefully thought out and designed. It has no doubt been improved from the design of earlier pianos. In this sense it has developed. But no improvement has taken place without someone being responsible for it. The developments have also been thought out and planned.

This is true of anything that is made. Where there is design there has to be a designer.

Occasionally my car breaks down. I would be a fool to put it in my garage and hope it gets better. Cars do not repair themselves. If they need attention, someone who knows about such things has to attend to them.

The theory of evolution makes no more sense than that. Yet thousands accept it. They believe that somehow, sometime, somewhere, the odds were such that it must have happened. They believe it happened not just once but time after time after time after ...

Sight, language, man's ability to reason, his sense of beauty, his reproductive system are all miracles in themselves. Such things could not all have happened by accident. Nor could the accident then

have been repeated over and over ad infinitum. They are things that betray design. They are perfectly fitted for a particular purpose. Awareness of them should make us question further. Admiration should lead us to want to know more. The planner, designer, builder of things so fantastic ought to arouse our interest and awe.

The Bible says:-

“For since the creation of the world his (God’s) invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead, so that they (men and women) are without excuse...”

(Romans 1:20)

This means that there are things about God which are normally invisible. These are such things as His power and Godhead. Even these invisible things can be seen! They can be “seen” by being understood through things that God has made.

“When I Consider The Heavens”

Nature can teach us that there is a God. It shows a powerful force that has created. That same force keeps things going. It sustains. Wherever we live, nature’s evidence of God is close by. In the window box or the garden; town centre landscaping or countryside; household pets or birdsong outdoors, there is a witness. It speaks of design, order, beauty, power and precision.

This evidence for God leaves us with no excuse. We ought to be finding out about Him. Nature can help us so far. It cannot tell us what God wants from us. That’s where we need the Bible. The Bible tells us why God made the earth.

Of course, it can be argued that no-one knows what happened at creation. No-one was there to see it. The answer to that objection is that God knows what happened. He told Moses. Moses wrote it down in the book of Genesis. There are scientists who accept this and believe in God. Even unbelieving scientists agree that Moses has the order right. The chance of his doing this accidentally are put at nearly one in 40 million. That suggests to me that Moses did not guess. He knew!

It seems harder to accept the theories of men than the simple statement of Genesis: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”

Creation is not the only Bible story people doubt. There are plenty of other examples of the “king’s new clothes” syndrome. People have accepted the word of others they felt should know. Or they have assumed that people speak with more authority than they do.

Myths or Reality

In this way there have arisen countless myths about the Bible. Nowhere does the Bible say that there were three kings who visited Jesus shortly after his birth. The ark was not a boat. It was not designed to sail, only to float. Angels appear as men and don’t have wings. The Bible does not contain the phrase “immortal soul” anywhere. It is not the Bible’s teaching that money is the root of all evil. The Bible says that it is the love of money which is at the root of so many troubles.

Once again reliance on what others say proves to be a mistake. Popular opinions, even the teaching of those who should know, are no basis for faith. There is an urgent need for personal seeking to find what is true and what is false.

And this is a matter of life and death.

CHAPTER 13

I CAUGHT my breath sharply. Had I heard that correctly? “Adolf Hitler did more for the cause of Zionism than almost any other individual”? The one who masterminded the atrocities against 6,000,000 Jews? The man behind the gas chambers and concentration camps of Europe?

Yet the more I thought about it, the more I could see what was meant. It is all part of an amazing 20th century miracle.

The Bible had always said that there would come a time when the Jews would return to their land. It seemed impossible. Jerusalem had been destroyed as long ago as the year 70 AD. In AD 132 it was ploughed exactly as Israel's own prophets had said would happen (Micah 3:12). Since that date there had been no Israeli nation.

The Ubiquitous Jew

There were Jews in almost every country of the world. They were proverbial of sharp practice and making money. This too was exactly what the Bible had foretold (Deuteronomy 28:37).

Even so, the idea that they might again become a nation was rarely entertained. Many said that God had cast them off forever. They claimed that God no longer had a purpose with the Jew. Prophecies which spoke of their return were given another meaning. People said that they were about Christians. They tried to apply them in a spiritual way. They said they referred to God's people in any century, not just to Jews. Some still hold that view today.

Others could see that was not right. Speaking of the nation before its destruction prophets made the matter clear:-

"So I scattered them among the nations, and they were dispersed throughout the countries;.. But I had concern for my holy name... Therefore say to the house of Israel... I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land."

(Ezekiel 36:19-24)

Passages like this do not refer to one nation being scattered and someone else being gathered. It is those same ones who are scattered that God is regathering. He is to bring them to their own land, the one they had before.

Even when it seemed least likely, some believed this. I know of those who, in the mid nineteenth century, looked forward to it happening.

Lost Nations ...

Any other nation deprived of their land for so long would have disappeared. Scattered among the nations Philistines, Babylonians and a host more have died out. They are no longer identifiable. By all the laws of reason the Jews ought to have been assimilated. The fact that they were not is amazing. Nineteen hundred years later, they were still easily recognisable.

Just before the turn of the century Zionism began to take off. A man called Theodore Herzl wrote a book which moved many Jews to think about their homeland. Soon there was a movement to obtain a national home for the Jews. At one stage Herzl was in favour of accepting land in Uganda. That year he died. The Zionist Congress overturned his decision. The Jewish home had to be in Palestine. That was one more in a whole line of remarkable events.

Desert to Vineyard

Palestine was a desolate country at that time. Desert, barren rocky wastes and uncultivated swamps were typical of most of the land. Changes were on the way, however. The prophet had said:

"The desolate land shall be tilled... So they will say, 'This land that was desolate has become like the garden of Eden; and the wasted, desolate, and ruined cities are now fortified and inhabited.'"

(Ezekiel 36:34-35)

Today the produce of that land is everywhere in shops. Reclamation, irrigation and cultivation have wonderfully transformed much of the land. It boasts production levels now that were undreamed of 150 years ago. It is another miracle.

The next link in this chain of events was in 1917. Then the British Government had a mandate from the League of Nations for the control of Palestine. Lord Balfour's Declaration permitted Jews to return to Palestine. The prophecies were beginning to take shape.

Dry Bones

Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones was once the subject of a music hall song. The bones were scattered along the valley floor. They were "the whole house of Israel". "They indeed say, 'Our bones are dry, our hope is lost, and we ourselves are cut off!' " (Ezekiel 37:11). The bones then began to join together. They formed skeletons. In vision they became people. Then God's spirit made them live. God said:

"Behold, O my people, I will open your graves and cause you to come up from your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel."

(Ezekiel 37:12)

Even until half-way through this century the land was known as Palestine. Today it is again called Israel.

Jeremiah too had spoken of the return:

"Behold, I will send for many fishermen,' says the LORD, 'and they shall fish them: and afterwards I will send for many hunters, and they shall hunt them from every mountain and every hill, and out of the holes of the rocks.'"

(Jeremiah 16:16)

The Balfour Declaration was not mightily successful. Jews went back in relatively small numbers. Ones and twos, handfuls only, scraping a living and finding it hard. It was like fishing them from the nations.

Then came Hitler, hunting the Jews from pillar to post. He forced them to flee. They were glad to return to their land for refuge. They went back by the boat load, hundreds and thousands of them. It was in this way that, without knowing or wishing it, Hitler supported the Zionist cause. He was responsible for the return of more Jews to Palestine than any other person. He was fulfilling Bible prophecy.

Jesus' Parable of the Fig Tree

Jesus too spoke of the time when the Jews would become a nation again. He used the fig tree as a symbol of Israel. During his ministry he cursed a fig tree for its barrenness. Later he taught that the fig tree would one day bud and sprout leaves again.

In 1948 the State of Israel came into being. Against all the odds and many enemies, the nation was born. This too was a miracle. Despite the declared intention of her Arab neighbours to drive her into the sea she stubbornly remains.

This is an extraordinary sequence of events. It has led some to say that tomorrow's news is in the Bible today. It is no wild claim. The Bible is still coming true before our eyes. What happens in the Middle East is important. Israel is important as God's witness. God has made an example of them for good or bad. Their story is proof of His control. It shows that He is active amongst the nations today.

Now, I am not pro-Israel in any political way. It does not make one pro-Jewish just seeing these things happen. The fact that they have happened does not prove that Israel is a Godly nation. It does not mean that God approves of what Israel does.

Indeed, God has shown that Israel has yet to suffer for its pride. Much of what it has worked hard to build up will be wrecked. It has not been built in God's strength. The nation must yet be humbled. Ezekiel said:-

"Not for your sake do I do this,' says the Lord GOD, 'let it be known to you. Be ashamed and confounded for your own ways, O house of Israel!'"

(Ezekiel 36:32)

Jeremiah said:-

“For my eyes are on all their ways; they are not hidden from my face, nor is their iniquity hidden from my eyes. And first I will repay double for their iniquity and their sin...”

(Jeremiah 16:17-18)

God is fully aware of what they are like. However, He has not finished with them. The Bible shows that they still have a part to play in His purpose. Paul said that Israel had been “hardened in part”. This has allowed the Gentiles to know the gospel. Then he says:-

“And so all Israel will be saved... Concerning the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but concerning the election they are beloved for the sake of the fathers. For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.”

(Romans 11:26-29)

A book as up to date as this deserves closer attention.

CHAPTER 14

GRAIN ships from the continent were docked at London. Their cargo was not all it purported to be, however. There was contraband hidden amongst the supplies of wheat.

It was 1526 and the illegal goods consisted of copies of the New Testament. Church and state held a stranglehold over the minds of men and women. They did not wish the Bible to be read. They did not wish their false teaching and wicked practices to be exposed.

These copies of the New Testament were in English. The common people would be able to understand them. Soon they would read the Bible for themselves for the first time. They would observe how different its teaching was from what they had been taught. Consequently the new books were banned. As many as could be found were burned. Sometimes those selling them, or even possessing them, were burnt too.

This is just one aspect of a fascinating story. The translations of the Bible available today are the end of a long line of events.

Most of the Old Testament was written in Hebrew. It was the language of the Jews. By the time of the apostles, however, a translation had been made into Greek. We call this the Septuagint because it was made by seventy scholars. The New Testament writers were familiar with this translation. They quoted from it in their preaching. The New Testament was also written in Greek.

Translations were later made from the Greek into Latin. The best of these was done by a scholar named Jerome at the end of the 4th Century. Latin was the language of the Romans whose empire stretched across most of the known world. However, Latin died out soon after the Roman Empire. For hundreds of years, there were no Bibles in the languages commonly spoken. These were the dark ages. Very few had the opportunity of learning to read or write.

There were others who were not slow to take advantage of this situation. Corruption spread fast. Sometimes it was deliberate. Wicked men saw ways of making money by misleading and terrorising ignorant people. Sometimes it was sheer apathy that led to wrong practices. Sometimes there were genuine misunderstandings in communication that twisted the message.

A Bible for the Plough Boy

John Wycliffe was anxious that men and women should have the Bible in their own tongue. He translated into English from the Latin. His was the first complete Bible in English in 1384. The printing press had not yet been invented, however. Wycliffe's Bible was handwritten. Copies took a long time to produce and were expensive.

William Tyndale shared Wycliffe's concern. He vowed to his employer, Sir John Walsh, "If God spare my life ere many years, I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the Scriptures than thou dost". He worked to translate the New Testament from the original Greek.

By this time printing was possible. It was Tyndale's printed New Testament which had begun to arrive at London docks in 1525-6. It was this that caused such a stir. Tyndale had been branded a heretic and forced to flee to the continent to complete his work.

Translation work on the Old Testament was well underway when Tyndale was betrayed. He was arrested and imprisoned. After a trial in which the verdict was a foregone conclusion, Tyndale was strangled and burnt at the stake. His dying prayer has become famous: "Lord, open the king of England's eyes".

By 1535 there was a complete English printed Bible. It was the work of a man named Myles Coverdale. It relied heavily on Tyndale's New Testament. Translation of most of the Old Testament was from Latin or Greek.

A friend of Tyndale called John Rogers produced a Bible in 1537. It was called Matthew's Bible. This disguised the fact that it was largely the work of Tyndale. He had translated about one third of the Old Testament from the Hebrew before his death.

In Every Church in England

By 1539 the Great Bible had been produced. This was published as the result of an injunction from the Secretary of State to the clergy. One was placed in every church. The tide was turning. Now people clamoured to read the Bible. It had often to be chained to the lectern to prevent its removal!

The English Bible was still not finally established, however. It see-sawed between acceptance and rejection as different monarchs reigned. Henry VIII had broken with Rome and sanctioned the Great Bible. Then he turned tail and forbade the common people to read the Bible again. He ordered any of Tyndale's work to be destroyed.

In 1547 Edward VI came to the throne. Bibles poured from the printing presses. People saved hard to be able to afford their own copy.

Queen Mary succeeded him in 1553 and everything changed. Bibles were removed from churches. John Rogers and others were burnt at the stake. Others, following in the steps of Tyndale, fled to the continent to continue translation and printing.

When Elizabeth I came to the throne in 1558, public reading of the Bible was restored. Soon the work of those who had fled was making itself felt in a new work of 1560. It was known as the Geneva Bible. It was more compact than other Bibles. The original manuscripts had contained no chapters or verses. These were first added to the Latin Bible. Now, the Geneva Bible divided the text into numbered verses. This is a great help to referencing and finding parts of Scripture. It can sometimes be a disadvantage where no division is really appropriate.

The Geneva Bible also contained marginal notes and explanations of the text. Sometimes these were controversial. Bishops made a revision of the Great Bible in 1568. We know it as the Bishop's Bible. The Geneva Bible was still the most used amongst ordinary people, however.

In 1604 King James suggested revising and improving the Bishop's Bible. Many of the best scholars were employed in the work. In 1611 the new Bible was published, "authorised" by the king. Still today the Authorised Version is one of the most well-loved of those available.

In 1870 it was decided to revise the version of 1611. New documents had come to light which improved the reliability of the New Testament. A number of English words had changed their meanings and spellings. In 1885 the Revised Version was published.

Within the last fifty or sixty years there have been many modern translations. These have tried to use the language and idiom of today. Some of these are very helpful. Others are very free translations. They use words found in only one or two manuscripts instead of taking the majority evidence.

All translations tell basically the same story, however. The most important thing is to read the Bible, in whatever version we have. Minor differences will be discovered as familiarity with text grows. Establishing a pattern of regular reading is of primary importance.

It is a tragedy to think how little read the Scriptures are today. At different stages of history men have clamoured to read them. Some have given the wages of several weeks to possess them, others walked miles to hear them. Some have risked their lives to pass them on to us, others have been tortured and burnt to death to translate them. How much value do we place on this word of God?

CHAPTER 15

“FIND the centre line and make a cut half an inch to one side.”

Our local supermarket had been running a promotion on unusual fruits. The instruction came from a leaflet on how to use mangoes. Another similar cut would isolate the large flat stone. Then the leaflet suggested criss-cross incisions in the flesh of the two halves.

This was interesting. We had been invited to make a trip to Trinidad and the information was sure to be useful. Some weeks later, armed with all the details, we had our first taste of the delicacy. The instructions were not quite so useful as we had expected.

A broad white grin spread across Helen's face as she watched us attacking the fruit. To her it was like needing a leaflet on how to peel a potato! “I show you,” she said, and seizing a mango she swiftly sank her teeth into it! The message was very clear. The way to eat mangoes is simply to get stuck in!

That is what this chapter is about. I could go on writing about the Bible for a long time. The real need of all of us, however, is to get stuck in!

There are lots of books about the Bible. There are no books like the Bible. The Bible stands alone.

Read It For Yourself

Some folk are interested in facts and figures. I could have checked on how many chapters, how many verses, the number of words, and so on. All this may be interesting but it is really of little value. Actually getting started with reading is far more important. Just take a good bite!

It is not so much a question of reading as of listening. Our scriptures are the voice of God. Repeatedly in the Bible He asks us to listen to what He has to say.

In the early books of the Old Testament the attention of Israel was demanded, “Hear, O Israel”. In the books of poetry and wisdom God pleads that His advice should be heard: “Hear, O my son, the instruction of a father”. In the prophets are warnings, “Hear ye the word of the Lord”.

Through the New Testament we hear God's word in the life and work of Jesus. “This is my beloved Son, hear him:”

Letting the Bible fall open at a page, making a stab in the dark, will not do. It is all the counsel of God. We need the whole of it. It deserves thought, a system, our best.

But How?

Yet I am often asked: "Where should I start?" For those not used to a regular diet, some tips may be helpful. One of the gospels is perhaps the easiest place for the beginner. Mark is the shortest and one of the simplest. His record of the work of Jesus Christ takes us straight to the hub of God's purpose.

The Acts of the Apostles will show how the story is taken up when he ascended to heaven.

At some early stage there will be need to go back into the Old Testament. Genesis is the best place to start; it lays the foundation for everything that follows. Exodus continues the story.

One chapter each day may be sufficient for a while. Some will want to do more. A chapter from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament side by side would then be a good idea.

There are a number of useful reading plans available. The publishers of this book produce one which spends a week alternately in each of the Testaments. It suggests one chapter per day for a year. It leads on to a more advanced course of three portions per day. By those it is possible to read the whole of the Bible (and the New Testament twice) in one year.

The introductory plan called the Bible Reading Planner and Notebook, or the follow up Bible Companion are both available free of charge. Write to the address at the end of this book.

Every Day!

Even more important than which parts to read first, however, is the method. First, make time. However busy we are, we can always make time for the things we really want to do. The Bible is the word of life. Set aside a particular time every day.

Be humble. The secrets of God are hidden from the proud. God loves the heart that simply wants to learn. Try and put aside the preconceptions and criticism. Let Him tell you.

Pray. Ask God for help in understanding what you read. Make your request a simple one, for example the words of Psalm 119:18 offered through Jesus Christ.

Then read. If you can read aloud, it helps. If you can read with others this is better still. Discuss what you read. Ask questions. Make notes. Sometimes you will meet chapters that seem difficult. It is important not to be put off by these. Even though you may not understand the meaning at once, keep reading. Things will be clearer as you become more acquainted with God's word.

Write down problems and difficulties. Look out for other Bible readers who may be able to help you. Check what you hear and what you read elsewhere against the Bible. The Bible itself says, "Prove all things".

In the last few chapters we have looked briefly at what the Bible is about. They have provided a sort of bird's eye view of God's purpose. Now we need to get more closely involved.

It has not been the purpose of this book to provide very much "evidence" for the reliability of the Bible. We have looked only at some of the more common objections to it. We have noted its internal harmony despite what is often said about supposed contradictions. Evolution has not disproved the Bible. It has merely suggested an alternative for those who want to dispose of God. In other ways science has supported the Bible. Archaeology and history have shown it to be reliable and trustworthy.

Most important of all, the Bible is relevant to today and today's problems. Others have found in it the whole purpose of their existence. Some have even given their lives so that we could read and understand it. We may now have access to its wisdom, guidance and strength.

The Bible is a book which has many critics and few readers. It claims to be inspired, the work of God. There are good reasons for accepting those claims. By far the best way of evaluating them is by personal Bible reading. All the evidence in the world is of no use unless you are prepared to get it out, dust it if necessary, and start reading ... now!

THE LORD JESUS

CHAPTER 16

MOST things require preparation.

The housewife knows only too well that the meals don't just appear. Someone has to prepare them. Despite all the "instant" commodities and pre-packaged goods, there is still work to be done.

You probably know the chap who has to work twice as hard before he can go away on holiday. By the time his holiday arrives he says he's too tired to enjoy it. There is so much preparation, it's just not worth it!

Maybe most of us don't mind decorating, but few of us enjoy scraping off the old paper or paint. Sanding down the woodwork is a bind compared with the satisfaction of painting the door. Yet the preparation for the job is often the most important.

For an important event this may go on over a long period. Nothing must be left to chance. Things need to be carefully thought out beforehand. Only a lot of planning and organisation will ensure success.

The Birth of The Saviour

Preparations for the birth of Jesus Christ had been going on for a very long time. They were not the sort of preparations you or I would have made. There was no great public announcement of the birth of Jesus. There was no fanfare of trumpets to herald his arrival into the world. The birth of the most important person in the world passed almost unnoticed.

He was to change the course of history more than any other single individual. Yet his birth was without fuss. The Bible says:

"But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law ..."

(Galatians 4:4)

God had been waiting until everything was prepared. The conditions had to be just right. He had planned the circumstances - the right time and place, the right nation and family, the right mother.

Promises Fulfilled

God had made promises about Jesus from the time when Adam and Eve had first sinned. His uniqueness might have been anticipated in what God said:

"I will put enmity Between you (the serpent) and the woman, And between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, And you shall bruise his heel."

(Genesis 3:15)

This child was to be "her Seed". It was to be the woman's descendant in a special way, but not the man's. It would be hard to understand how any child could be born without the involvement of a man. This would be the work of God. It would be a miracle.

The prophet Isaiah foretold the same thing:

"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call his name Immanuel."

(Isaiah 7:14)

A virgin with a child and no husband would lead to accusations of illegitimacy. Joseph would be upset to find his future wife pregnant. They were engaged but not married. They had not “come together”. Joseph was disinclined to continue the relationship. It was while he was considering this that the angel reassured him. Mary had not been unfaithful.

“But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.’”

(Matthew 1:20)

The matter had been explained to Mary in a similar way.

“Then Mary said to the angel, ‘How can this be, since I do not know a man?’ And the angel answered and said to her, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that holy one who is to be born will be called the Son of God.’”

(Luke 1:34-35)

Two Thousand Years Before ...

God had made other preparations for the birth of His son too. Two thousand years earlier God had made important promises to Abraham. These also concerned Christ. Abraham’s wife, Sarah, had been barren. She had miraculously born Abraham a son when she was old. God had said that by that son, Isaac, Abraham’s descendants would become a great nation.

Then God asked the impossible. He asked Abraham to sacrifice that precious son. It was a request that seemed to make no sense, but it was a test of Abraham’s faith.

Abraham proved himself willing to obey God. At the end he was stopped from killing Isaac. The test had served its purpose. It had been a pointer to God’s willingness to give His only son as a sacrifice. Jesus would die for the sins of men. God made to Abraham the greatest in a long line of promises. It spoke of exactly this:

“By myself I have sworn, says the LORD, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son, in blessing I will bless you, and in multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven and as the sand which is on the sea-shore; and your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.”

(Genesis 22:16-18)

Many descendants are spoken of in these verses. One particular descendant is also mentioned. The King James Authorised Version makes this clear. It says: “He shall possess the gate of his enemies.” Other versions put this differently. We know the words refer to one special man, however, because the New Testament tells us so. Speaking of this same promise, it says:

“Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He does not say, ‘And to seeds,’ as of many, but as of one, ‘And to your seed,’ who is Christ.”

(Galatians 3:16)

Jesus was the “seed” of whom God spoke. The blessing he was to bring was the forgiveness of sins. We do not have to work that out ourselves. Once again the New Testament explains the verses for us:-

“You are sons of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with our fathers, saying to Abraham, ‘And in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’ To you first, God, having raised up his servant Jesus, sent him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from your iniquities.”

(Acts 3:25-26)

A Special Child - A Special Name

This is why Joseph was instructed by the angel to call Mary's child "Jesus". Jesus is a name which means that God saves. He is the Saviour.

"And she will bring forth a son, and you shall call his name JESUS, for he will save his people from their sins."

(Matthew 1:21)

Saviour speaks only of one aspect of his work. To the name Jesus was added the title "Christ". This is a word that means "the anointed one". It refers to a priest or a king since they were the people anointed to office. Jesus is both of these as we shall see later. Jesus is a priest now. Jesus is to come back to reign over God's kingdom.

A King For Israel

The destiny of Jesus as king had also been prepared by God. When king David had reigned over Israel many years before, he had done it well. He recognised that his subjects were really God's people. In a sense it was God's kingdom which king David was looking after. So pleased was God with David's attitude that He made promises to him:-

"When your days are fulfilled and you rest with your fathers, I will set up your seed after you, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever... And your house and your kingdom shall be established for ever before you. Your throne shall be established for ever."

(2 Samuel 7:12-16)

Once again we can see that this promise is about our Lord Jesus Christ. Although he was to be of David's line, God also said: "I will be his Father, and he shall be my son."

The kingdom was later divided and became two kingdoms. It had many bad kings who ignored God's laws. Eventually both kingdoms were removed by invading armies. God spoke of the end of the last of these kingdoms like this:-

"thus says the Lord GOD: 'Remove the turban, and take off the crown; Nothing shall remain the same. Exalt the lowly, and abase the exalted. Overthrown, overthrown, I will make it overthrown! It shall be no longer, Until he come whose right it is, and I will give it to him.'"

(Ezekiel 21:26-27)

God had made preparations for this to be fulfilled too. Jesus was the one with a double right to the throne. In the first place, the people of Israel were, in reality, God's people and God's kingdom. Jesus Christ was God's son. He was therefore the heir of God's kingdom.

In the second place God had promised that a member of David's family would be on the throne for ever. Through his mother, Mary, Jesus was a descendant of David. Luke shows this in his gospel. Jesus had a claim to the throne in Jerusalem for two reasons therefore. He was the one foretold by the prophet "whose right it is".

This destiny of Jesus was brought out in the message of the angel to Mary. In his words are incorporated the two aspects of God's promise to David so long before:

"And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call his name JESUS. He will be great, and will be called *the Son of the Highest*; and the Lord God will give him *the throne of his father David*. And he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." (The italics are mine.)

(Luke 1:31-33)

As a point of interest, Joseph too, the foster father of Jesus, was also of David's family. Matthew's gospel gives a genealogy which shows this even though Jesus was not descended from Joseph.

There were still other "preparations". Joseph and Mary were residents of Nazareth, a town of Galilee in the north. One of the prophets had said:-

"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Though you are little among the thousands of Judah, Yet out of you shall come forth to me The one to be ruler in Israel, Whose goings forth have been from of old, From everlasting."

(Micah 5:2)

At the time of the birth of Jesus the Romans ruled over the Jews. They decided that all Jews must be registered in the town of their origin. We may be sure that Caesar had no interest in fulfilling the word of God, yet he did.

"And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child."

(Luke 2:1-5)

The timing of the birth of Jesus was important, too. The prophet Daniel had been given a vision about the coming of Messiah (Christ). He spoke of certain time periods pointing to the birth of Jesus. Luke tells us that some were waiting for this great event. Some were "looking" for redemption. Some were "in expectation" of the Christ.

When everything was just right, Jesus was born.

CHAPTER 17

OUR young daughter had raced on ahead. She was the first to discover that the car had been broken into. As the meaning of the smashed window and the missing handbag dawned, her eyes filled with tears.

People react to things very differently. Our guest, whose handbag it was, felt her mind reeling with the shock. She was grappling with the problem of what was missing and the sense of loss. Some of us felt sorrow that she should have been the one to suffer, others relief that things were no worse. Then came thoughts of the inconvenience. It would have to be reported to the police, the bank and the car insurers. Items would need to be replaced.

Reactions to the birth of Jesus were all very different, too. Some were concerned, others were not.

Mary and Joseph had made the long journey to Bethlehem under difficult circumstances. They must have wondered why there was no room for them in the town. Why had God not prepared the best possible place for the birth of His son? Jesus was born in humility and poverty, in the stable of an inn.

Watching On The Hillside

Shepherds were told of the birth. Angels informed them that Jesus was both Saviour and King. There might have been many reasons why they should not go into the town to see the babe. It was night, it was inconvenient, it was dangerous to leave the sheep. Yet they came "with haste".

A few weeks later the little family visited the temple in Jerusalem. They brought the offering assigned for the poor and made a sacrifice to God. A man named Simeon was moved by God to see Jesus as the salvation God had sent. He knew that Jesus would be a light also for the Gentiles (non-Jews).

Anna, an ageing prophetess, was there too. She had served God throughout a very long life. Her patience and faithfulness were rewarded. She too was glad to see Jesus.

Wise men came some time afterwards. Guided by a star from some distant land they made a long journey. They may have had to pass through dangerous terrain and unfriendly territory. Yet their mission was urgent, the risks worthwhile. They met the little family and worshipped the Lord.

Not all were so pleased to see Jesus nor so anxious to worship him. King Herod, ruling the area under the Romans, heard of Jesus through the visit of the wise men. He saw the birth as a threat to his throne. Unable to learn more from the wise men, he massacred all the boys under two in Bethlehem.

The chief priests and scribes knew the prophecies. They were the ones able to help the wise men to locate the babe. Yet there is no indication that they went to see Jesus. They did not go to worship him themselves.

Theory and Practice

In theory they were looking for Christ. In practice they were not. Perhaps they had preconceived notions that prevented them seeing the truth. Maybe they were looking for the wrong thing.

The Scripture says that it is in this way that God often works:-

“For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in his presence.”

(1 Corinthians 1:26-29)

There is a lesson, however, in these different reactions. The Bible shows that Jesus is to come again. It was part of his teaching that he will return to the earth in person to establish God's kingdom. When he does we may expect to see the same attitudes again.

There will be people who only learn about Jesus at the very last minute. Like the shepherds they will hurry to come to the Lord before it is too late. They will put aside all the possible excuses. They will put Jesus first.

Others like Simeon and Anna will have been waiting a very long time. Baptised and serving God over many years, they will be rewarded at his coming.

Some of those who learn of Christ do so in difficult circumstances. They may be in countries behind the “iron curtain” where they cannot worship freely. Some may be persecuted for their faith. Their “journey” to Christ may be fraught with hardship and danger. Yet they regard all this as worthwhile. Like the wise men they have a compelling desire to meet Jesus and honour him.

Even in more enlightened countries there are those who do not acknowledge God. They will not be pleased to see Jesus. Some may openly oppose him at his coming. Their opposition will come to nothing. Jesus will destroy them.

Sitting On The Fence

Sadly there will be those who are neither for, nor against, Jesus. It is this apathy that is the worst of all. They may know about the coming of Jesus. They may have heard about his impending return to earth. Like the Jewish elders they will not have been moved by what they know. They will have done nothing about it until it was too late. They will not be with him.

The birth of Jesus pushed men and women into groups. His later work forced them to make decisions and own their loyalties. This is what is meant by his coming “to set a man against his father”. It is not that the Lord set out to be divisive in his work. It is rather that his work causes people to make decisions. It can often put friends on different sides of the fence.

We too each need to consider the work of Jesus. We too need to decide, each for himself, or herself, where we stand. To know and do nothing is the worst thing of all.

CHAPTER 18

SOME years ago I had the privilege of flying over the Canadian Rockies. The plane took off from Calgary in cloud. Soon, however, the sky cleared. The weather was beautiful and our journey westwards was breathtaking.

I still look at the slides of that memorable flight. The mountains were a picture of beauty. There were long ridges and folds capped with snow. They looked like so many pointed cakes with icing sugar spilling down the sides. Lower peaks were dark and barren, knife edges of rock looking uninviting and dangerous. Between them were inky black pools. Ribbons of dark turquoise joined them together.

No sign of life could be seen from the height we were. The whole area might well have been the domain of the brown bear alone. It was beautiful, but stark, bare and unwelcoming.

A few days later we were making the journey from West to East. This time, however, we travelled by train through the mountains. The picture was quite different. True, the snow-capped peaks still peeped out at the top, but everywhere was so green. Mile after mile of thick forests lined the track. There were thousands upon thousands of trees. The sun lit up the rivers and made the water sparkle as it splashed over rocks. Sometimes it was clear as crystal. At other times it was milky white as it came from the melting glaciers.

The landscape was punctuated with life. There were stations, villages, timber houses, road construction vehicles. The lakes were no longer black, but blue. Often they were littered with debris from floating logs. It was the same place, but it looked so different. It was pleasant, warm and inviting. We were seeing it from a different perspective. Neither view of the area would have been quite true on its own. Each was incomplete. Our two journeys together gave us an accurate picture.

A Question of Perspective

People hold different views about Jesus Christ. Some believe that he was just a man. They would agree that he was a very good man, but nothing more. They would attribute his miracles to exaggeration by people who loved him.

Others in an attempt to honour Christ claim that he was God. No doubt their motives are good, but they go beyond what the Bible itself says. Neither of these views gives us a true picture. The Bible view of Jesus lies somewhere between them.

First, it shows that Jesus is born of God. God is his Father. He was not born in any ordinary way. We have already seen that no man was involved in his conception. Mary was a pure virgin when Jesus was conceived. The seed was placed in her womb by the power of God.

The Bible is most careful to describe Mary as the mother of Jesus. It is equally careful not to describe Joseph as his father. It uses phrases like, "his mother and Joseph", or "as was supposed, the son of". Joseph was merely a foster father.

Jesus was uniquely the son of God. He was not the son of God in the way that Adam was. He was not the son of God because God made him. He was the "only begotten of the Father".

Tempted Just Like Us

This does not make Jesus and God the same person. Jesus was not God. Jesus had one human parent, Mary. Because of that he inherited certain human traits. He had tendencies that were inherited from men going back to Adam. He had inclinations that God could not experience. God cannot be associated with sin in any way. Jesus was tested by sin. Human nature urged him to do the wrong things. Jesus resisted. He did not sin. He was sinless.

“For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathise with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.”

(Hebrews 4:15)

These temptations were real. They would have had no point if Jesus had been unable to sin. The Bible shows he had to fight to overcome them. It was a struggle, but Jesus was victorious.

Some have suggested that Jesus simply took on a human form. Inside he was God. He merely looked like us in order to be able to die and help us. This idea is foreign to the Bible.

The Bible says that Jesus was born. It was the birth of a new child, just like each of us once experienced. Then Jesus grew up, just as we do. He “increased in wisdom and stature”. It does not say that Jesus changed his form. It does not speak of a different sort of existence. That would have been a metamorphosis as when a chrysalis becomes a butterfly.

Jesus did not exist before his birth as a real person. There are some Bible verses which some think suggest he did. They can be read in two ways. This is because Jesus existed in the mind of God. He was always part of God’s plan. He was the centre of God’s purpose, the most important part of it. God always intended to create and send Jesus. This is what those hard verses mean. If we understand them in this way, they become consistent with the other things the Bible tells us.

This is not just an academic issue. It is a very important question. If Jesus was God, or an angel, he is unable to help us. He can only be of help in our temptations if he has gone through the same himself and overcome them. Yet the Bible is clear that angels cannot sin. It is equally clear that God cannot experience temptation:-

“Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am tempted by God’; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he himself tempt anyone.”

(James 1:13)

The Bible teaches consistently that there is one God. It does not use the term “God the Son”. It is important, therefore, to see Jesus from both aspects. He is son of God. Yet he is a son of man by his birth of Mary. Both titles belong to him. This balance in his nature was vital for the work he came to do.

Jesus is son of God not only because he was born by God’s power, however. Sons are often like their fathers. Jesus showed the virtues and character of God. His life showed us what his Father is like. The Bible says he “manifested” God. That is why he could say, “He who has seen me has seen the Father”.

A Constant Battle

Jesus was never presumptuous, however. He was always aware that he could sin. He would not allow anyone to call him perfect, or even “good”. His goodness could be wrecked by one false move. Only after he had died would his battle be over. Only when his work was completed would he be really perfect.

Of himself, Jesus often used the title “son of man”. This would remind him of his tremendous responsibilities. Jesus was also the first man to keep all God’s laws. He was the only one to fulfil what God had intended when He first created man. He knew God’s purpose in creation and he lived it. In this way he became the son of man. The Bible calls him “the last Adam”.

Psalms 8 tells of the way in which the first Adam was given domination over everything that God had made. He forfeited that rulership. Man today is not in charge of God’s creation. He can only rule it with fear and the gun. Through sin, the authority which God gave Adam was lost. His destiny was unfulfilled.

Through his sinless life Jesus obtained that authority and rulership. The Bible tells us so. Notice how these verses speak of Jesus being “made perfect” through the things he suffered. He was already perfect in that he had not sinned. He was not finally perfect or complete until he had died.

THE LORD JESUS

"But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honour, that he, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone. For it was fitting for him, for whom are all things and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the author of their salvation perfect through sufferings."

(Hebrews 2:9-10)

We shall look again at Jesus' suffering and death in a later chapter. We must also look at the fact that Jesus is "crowned with glory and honour". Jesus has received great honour. He shares God's throne. He bears God's name and titles. This is because he loved God and did His will throughout his life. He was not God, but he worked as one with God. Consequently God has exalted him to His side.

He has not exalted him because he was God anyway. He was not. He has exalted him because of his obedience as a son of man. Jesus has not received a glory that he formerly enjoyed. He has received glory and immortality as a gift from God.

"And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted him and given him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow..."

(Philippians 2:8-10)

All men must now honour Jesus as they honour God. This still does not make Jesus equal with God. This is how Jesus spoke of the relationship between God and himself during his life:-

"Most assuredly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of himself, but what he sees the Father do..."

(John 5:19)

"I can of myself do nothing. As I hear, I judge; and my judgment is righteous, because I do not seek my own will but the will of the Father who sent me."

(John 5:30)

"If you loved me, you would rejoice because I said, 'I am going to the Father,' for my Father is greater than I."

(John 14:28)

Even when Jesus has finally removed all sin from the earth, he will still be subject to God. God is supreme, even when His purpose is complete. This is frequently misunderstood. So many people confuse Jesus with God. Though they are one in purpose like people getting married, they are not one person.

"There is... one God and Father of all, who is above all."

(Ephesians 4:6)

"Now when all things are made subject to him, then the Son himself will also be subject to him who put all things under him, that God may be all in all."

(1 Corinthians 15:28)

Getting the nature of Jesus clear from the start will help us greatly to honour him as we should. It will also help us to appreciate the enormous task he has performed. It will help us be more grateful for his precious love and sacrifice.

CHAPTER 19

WE were absolutely worn out. We had been walking all the morning and it was well past lunch time. The roads were dusty and hard, the weather very hot. Our feet ached and were blistered.

We were on the outskirts of Reykjavik in Iceland. When the bus appeared going our way we climbed thankfully aboard. We paid the standard fare and were glad to sink into a seat.

The bus paused a few minutes at a bus station in one of the suburbs. Then it set off on a route which, ten minutes later, brought us back to the same bus station. We remained in our seats. Almost certainly now the bus would head for the city centre. However, the bus started, and again did another short circular tour. This was now our third look at the same bus station!

It was then that Alex felt we should ask. The driver politely told us that we needed to change buses to reach the centre. Eventually we reached our destination safely. Our circular routes had led nowhere, though frankly we had been glad of the rest.

Going Round in Circles

I wonder how many other people travel on the wrong bus. In spiritual terms I would guess it is quite a lot. Like us, they haven't bothered to ask where it is going. They enjoy the rest and the view. They find church pleasant. They like the atmosphere, or the minister, or their circle of friends. Whether these things lead to God's kingdom is a question they prefer to shelve.

Many receive their Bible teaching second hand. They have heard that the Bible is a difficult book. Trying to sort it out themselves would be hard work and demand a lot of effort. They would rather be told what they should believe.

There is a certain security in having answers to all the questions, too. It is human to like to think we know. Even if perhaps they are the wrong answers, it is comforting to have the problems all sewn up. If someone trained in theology tells us, human nature is often glad to accept what they say.

It was a little like that in the Lord's day. The religious leaders, scribes and Pharisees, thought they had it all worked out. The man in the street could seldom read. Perhaps there was more excuse for him than for most today. He had little alternative but to accept what was said.

Yet the teaching of those leaders was going nowhere. They weren't "leaders" at all really, for they had lost their way. The work of John the Baptist stood in sharp contrast to their teaching.

John was a cousin of Jesus, older by about six months. He too was part of God's preparations for the work that Jesus had to do. God made John a prophet and inspired him to prepare the way for Jesus. He lived an austere life in the wilderness. He shunned the trappings and luxury of society to drive home his message. He spoke of the need for repentance and change.

He showed the Jews that they could not rely on being God's people if they did not keep His laws. They were trading on a reputation. They felt they were alright because they were Jews, part of a chosen race. John showed that salvation is a personal thing. They needed to repent, to be sorry for their past sins. They needed to live God's ways.

Ordinary people, tax collectors and soldiers all felt the sharp edge of John's tongue. Many wanted to start afresh and were baptised. The religious leaders were not. They did not feel the need to change. Though condemned by John they brazened it out, unwilling to humble themselves. They took refuge in mocking John and criticising his work.

As men responsible for the religious life of the nation, they had a duty to consider what he said. They had an obligation to test the message of any prophet. They then had to decide whether he was true or false. They rejected John, but only because he spoke against them. Even the people could see that he was a true prophet.

When, a little later, Jesus began his teaching, he talked of John. He said that John the Baptist was a witness to the fact that God had sent him.

The religious leaders questioned Jesus about his authority. They asked him what right he had to teach and do the things he did in the temple. Jesus answered by asking them a question.

A Difficult Question

He asked them about the baptism of John. By this Jesus meant John's authority to preach and baptise. He was asking the scribes and elders who they thought commissioned John. Was it "from heaven or from men"? Was it God who had told John to do that work, or was it just someone's idea?

The leaders were embarrassed. If they admitted that John was a prophet, Jesus would ask why they had taken no notice of him. They had not believed John, nor been baptised by him. They dare not say that God had inspired him or sent him.

At the same time, they dare not say that John was not a true prophet. There was a crowd there. Many, if not most, of that crowd had accepted John as a prophet. They had confessed their sins and been baptised. Lamely, the elders pretended not to know the answer.

Yet Jesus had made the answer plain enough. John the Baptist was the herald of Jesus, a forerunner. Whoever sent John must also have sent Jesus. Whoever gave John his authority gave Jesus the right to speak his message too. If John was a prophet of God, as he was, then Jesus too was sent from God.

The Old Testament had said:-

"Behold, I send my messenger, And he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord, whom ye seek, Will suddenly come to his temple, Even the Messenger of the covenant, In whom you delight. Behold, he is coming; Says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, And who can stand when he appears?"

(Malachi 3:1-2)

Already the leaders had suffered the blistering rebukes of John. Now they were to have their hypocrisy exposed by the Lord Jesus. They would not be able to stand when he began to cut through their empty traditions. Their wickedness would be revealed, their pride condemned. Those who followed them were going nowhere. Jesus was the one able to lead them in the way of truth.

CHAPTER 20

IF you are a parent you may know the worry of losing a child. It may be in a large store or a park. Perhaps it is simply that the child has not come home at the time expected. Only another parent can appreciate the anxiety this can cause.

It begins with repeated glances at the clock and out of the window. Then you go outside to see if there is any sign of them. You go over in your mind the instructions you gave before they left. You consider what they said and any clue as to why they are late.

The mind begins to run riot on all kinds of possibilities which you dismiss. They are unreasonable. Common sense tries to convince you that a perfectly simple explanation must exist.

As time goes on and you begin to get sick with worry, you may seek neighbours to question. You may begin some kind of search. When the child suddenly turns up, however, the worry disappears. It is immediately replaced by anger. Relief gives way to a good scolding of the child and perhaps a good hiding too!

We know nothing of Jesus' childhood except for one incident when he was lost. There are many silly traditions and suppositions about his early life. The Bible is silent, however, save for this one event.

Lost in the Temple

Jesus was twelve. As the custom was, his parents took him to Jerusalem. It was his first opportunity to celebrate the Jewish feast of Passover there.

It was on the way home afterwards that Mary and Joseph first missed Jesus. They had assumed that he was with others of their party. It must have been with some horror that they discovered he was not.

Searching for a small boy in a large city is no easy task. It was three days before they found him. He was in the temple listening eagerly and asking questions. Mary at once chided her son:-

“Son, why have you done this to us? Look, your father and I have sought you anxiously.”

Twelve years had led her to forget in that instant that Jesus was not Joseph’s son. The reply was right:-

“Why is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be about my Father’s business?”

(Luke 2:48-49)

Not Lost - At Home

Jesus was not lost. God was his Father. The temple was God’s house. Jesus was “at home” there. It was where he belonged. He was busy in his Father’s business.

Scripture is silent again about the next eighteen years. It tells us only that Jesus was humbly obedient.

“Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was subject to them... And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and men.”

(Luke 2:51-52)

At around thirty, Jesus began his work for God. It was the age that a priest could begin work in the temple. Jesus’ work would make him the only effective priest for the world. No-one else should bear that title now. The sacrifice that Jesus was to offer was himself.

Jesus was aware from a very early time of the need to die. He came to John the Baptist to begin his ministry by being baptised in the River Jordan.

Jesus had no sin to be forgiven. John felt that Jesus really ought to be baptising him. Jesus said his own baptism was necessary to “fulfil all righteousness”. John and Jesus went down into the water together.

In this way Jesus began a life devoted to pleasing God. For him, baptism was a promise to do God’s will. Even though it would eventually mean death, Jesus was promising his Father that he would do His will all the way to the cross.

Dying in Water

In the Bible, baptism is a symbol of death and burial. Obviously, therefore, it involves being totally immersed beneath the water. It is the way in which we die with Christ. Jesus said that anyone who wanted to be a disciple of his had to do this. We have each to take up the cross if we want to follow him. We have to die to the past by going down into the water and being buried in it. Then, a split second later, we rise to live a life devoted to God. Jesus has set us this example.

The first miracle of Jesus points the same way. He was at a wedding when the wine ran out. Jesus turned water into wine. That is what his life was about. Jesus was baptised in water to fulfil righteousness. Wine is a symbol of his blood. He died to do God’s will. Fulfilling righteousness was the anticipation of his prayer in the garden of Gethsemane, “not my will, but yours, be done”.

Jesus gave his life. He did not only give it up by his willingness to die. He gave his whole life, every moment of it, to the will of God.

It was with this attitude that he went into the wilderness. At his baptism there had been the voice of God:-

"This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

(Matthew 3:17)

With that voice Jesus had received the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus was not like others whom God had sent. The prophets of the Old Testament had been inspired. They were moved by God's Holy Spirit power at certain times. They were made to say certain things, speaking God's word. At other times they were ordinary men, living ordinary lives.

Our Lord was not moved by the Spirit on occasions only. He was given the spirit to use as he chose. John said that it "remained" on him. Luke says that it led him into the wilderness. It was part of God's purpose, then, that Jesus should be tested.

In The Wilderness

The tests were all concerned with the misuse of that power. With unlimited resources at his disposal, Jesus must have felt those temptations keenly. He could so easily have satisfied his own hunger. It would seem so reasonable to do some heroic act that would make everyone accept his leadership. Why not use his power to assume world rulership and put everything right at once?

The answer was that the power was not for use for himself. Such motives would be selfish and sinful. He may rule the world, but he would then become part of it. He would be unable to save the world. Instead he would then be ruled by the world's way of thinking. Human thinking is the Satan, the adversary to God's will.

Sin needed a sacrifice. Jesus was prepared to sacrifice his own will to do God's. He was prepared even to sacrifice his life.

It was in this way that he answered the temptations. He used the Bible (our Old Testament). He looked at things from God's point of view. He brought his own desires into line with God's will. He fought self. He did not give in to sin. He used his power to glorify his Father.

Jesus found the right use of his power in the miracles which he performed. These were a witness to the fact that he spoke God's word.

"... for the works which the Father has given me to finish - the very works that I do -bear witness of me, that the Father has sent me."

(John 5:36)

Four Witnesses

Here Jesus shows that there were four witnesses to demonstrate that he was the promised Messiah:-

- a) God's word through Moses in the Old Testament would identify him.
- b) God's prophet, John the Baptist, had pointed him out.
- c) God's voice at Jesus' baptism had acknowledged him.
- d) God's power in the miracles proved it too.

The miracles which appear later in the New Testament are similar. They were done by the apostles. In reality, however, it was Jesus who was working through the apostles. It was his work which the apostles were continuing after the Lord had gone to heaven.

The miracles were a demonstration of the truth of what they taught. The New Testament had not been written at that stage. Someone may have asked how they could be sure that what the apostles preached was true. How could they know that what they said about Jesus was right? The apostles could demonstrate that God was with them by the miracles. God would not support impostors. Holy spirit gifts proved the truth of what they said.

Later these gifts appear to have died out. We only ever hear of the earliest apostles and Paul being able to pass on the gifts. They would therefore last only a generation after these apostles died. This is consistent with what the apostles said:

“But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away.”

(1 Corinthians 13:8)

A Simple Test of Truth

If, today, we are asked about the truth of what men preach, we must test it by the Bible. The Bible was written by men who were themselves moved by the Holy Spirit. We should therefore treat with care and suspicion those who claim to possess Holy Spirit powers. today. Especially this is true if their teaching does not agree with what the Bible says. There are many who claim to be guided by the spirit but who yet differ from one another!

The miracles Jesus performed were done for a variety of reasons. Sometimes he healed because he had compassion on the sick. His heart went out to those who were suffering. Sometimes it was specifically to show the power and glory of God. Jesus wanted men to know and worship God. Sometimes it was because people asked to be healed in faith. Jesus was impressed when he found faith and trust in his Father.

Jesus did not say that faith was essential before the miracle could work, however. The failure of modern faith healers is often blamed on a lack of faith in those wanting healing. That was never the case with Jesus. No-one was ever half healed!

The miracles Jesus performed also proved his power and ability to forgive sins. What Jesus did for men and women physically, he can do for us in spiritual ways too. This is even more important.

When Jesus healed the blind man, it showed that he is able to help us see the way of salvation. Jesus healed the lame. He can teach us to walk - in God's ways. Jesus healed the unclean spirit, or epilepsy. He can help us put aside our unbalanced attitudes and foolishness. Jesus raised the dead. He is able to take away our sins so that we may live in God's sight.

The miracles of Jesus demonstrate his power. It is a power still by which he can help us. We need to come to him through his teaching and the scriptures. We need to ask his help in prayer and express our faith in baptism. We then can be healed. We can follow him.

CHAPTER 21

TWO coffee mugs stood side by side on adjacent desks. It happened every day. Alistair and I faced each other across desks that met. When we had each drunk our coffee the empty mugs stood next to each other waiting to be washed.

Neither of us spoke about them. Both of us were busy. Perhaps each of us was secretly willing the other to make the first move. It would be obviously discourteous to take just one mug when both stood together. It would look rude to wash only my own. I had no objection to washing both sometimes. Yet I was afraid that, if I volunteered, I would end up with the job permanently! Alistair might just let me go on doing it and then I would be the mug!

Alistair and I never discussed the situation, but I suspect he sometimes felt the same. Neither of us wanted to take the job on and be stuck with it. Eventually I decided that I ought to be more helpful. I took Alistair's mug and washed them both. The following day I did the same. Very soon, Alistair began getting up promptly to wash the mugs. Perhaps he would have felt guilty to let me go on doing it. Whatever the reason, we shared the job from then on. No-one felt that they were being taken advantage of.

It may not work out as happily as that every time. That is why some feel that the teaching of the Lord Jesus will not work. They maintain that the sermon on the mount is just not practical today. They are afraid that, if they try to operate its principles, they will be “taken for a ride”.

The teaching of Jesus, however, is that it doesn't matter. Would it have made any real difference if I had been stuck with the mugs every day? Is it of such great importance if people do put on us? Jesus' teaching is that we should treat it as of little consequence now. It is of consequence to God how His children are treated. It is of even greater consequence to Him how they endure that treatment. Jesus accepted it. He urged others to follow his example.

A New Way to Live

This is criticised and discouraged by the majority today. The characteristics most admired are not those which the Lord Jesus urged. Look at the following list, part of the teaching of Jesus in the sermon on the mount:-

"Blessed are the poor in spirit...
Blessed are those who mourn...
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...
Blessed are the merciful...
Blessed are the pure in heart...
Blessed are the peacemakers...
Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake..."

(Matthew 5:3-10)

Judging from prevailing attitudes today, this list is either rejected or ignored. In the world's view poverty of any kind is to be pitied and remedied. Meekness is despised. It means giving in and reflects weakness. Making peace is alright provided it is on the right terms and no-one loses face.

Getting on in Life?

Instead of Jesus' teaching, we are taught to admire the man who is so confident, determined and strong. Today's hero is the one who can drive the fastest, shoot the straightest and play the hardest. Fighting for your rights, getting your own back, aggressive and selfish ideals, are what men expect. It is those who stand up for themselves who are most respected.

Yet retaliation never fosters good relations. It only breeds greater hatred. Extremes beget extremes. Opposing ideas are apt to push the parties further and further apart. Only the willingness to make concessions, or to accept wrong can break the chain.

This is exactly where the teaching of Jesus leads. It shows that we should be prepared to suffer wrong. In the end it is of little importance whether or not we are taken advantage of. God knows our circumstances. He will see that justice is done in His own good time.

"But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you,"

(Matthew 5:44)

Loving enemies then is not so outrageous as sometimes it is made to sound. It may sometimes result in further suffering. It may sometimes shame the opposition and turn an enemy into a friend.

In this attitude God is Himself the supreme example.

"that you may be the sons of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so? Therefore you shall be perfect" (grown up, mature in your attitudes) "just as your Father in heaven is perfect."

(Matthew 5:45-48)

This is why Jesus said that peacemakers would be called sons of God. God Himself is the great peacemaker. It is those who seek to be like Him that He wants.

God Will Act

This does not mean that enemies will get away with it for ever. It is shown elsewhere in this book that God will judge them. His principles for judgment are eternal. What this does mean is that it is not our prerogative to judge and condemn others. In so doing we shall stand condemned ourselves.

“Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the same measure you use, it will be measured back to you.”

(Matthew 7:1)

This instruction does not mean that we have no judgments to make. The Christian must be discerning. He must weigh things up. He needs to differentiate between right and wrong. The sermon on the mount is also about the choices that we need to make.

Jesus helps us to appreciate true values. He speaks of earthly treasures or of setting our hearts on more lasting things. He speaks of being motivated by greed and money, or of making God the vital force in our lives. He speaks of basing our lives on the sands of uncertainty, or of being firmly based on the rock of his unchanging standards. He speaks of going with the crowd along the broad way, or of being part of a minority on the narrow road of truth.

People were astonished at his teaching. Jesus did not pass opinions like the scribes. He did not quote Rabbis and traditions. There was no waffle in his answers. Jesus knew God's will. He spoke with authority, the authority of God whose word it was.

CHAPTER 22

OCCASIONALLY, in the course of my work, I visit an area where houses are being demolished. It is not uncommon to find the remains of one house joined to a property left standing. Up against a gable wall will be evidence of a fireplace now gone. There may be a chimney breast still tastefully wallpapered, but exposed to the weather. It looks strangely out of place outside. It was once a part of someone's home. It feels strange to discover something so private. Even though it is only part of a derelict site, it is a little piece of someone's life laid bare.

Yet our lives are always laid bare before God. He sees into the darkest corners of our hearts. Even things we would have kept secret are open and known to Him. We may sometimes wonder how God regards us. What does He see in our lives? How do we look to Him?

Parables are designed to help us see ourselves from God's point of view. When King David had sinned, God sent the prophet Nathan to speak to him. Nathan knew that he would get nowhere by confronting David with his sin. Instead, he told him a story. A rich man with great flocks received an honoured guest. To entertain this guest he did not take a lamb from his own very large flocks. Instead he took the only ewe lamb of a poor servant and killed that.

Self Condemned

King David was angry. He felt this was a mean and despicable act. He immediately pronounced his judgment on the man who would do such a thing. He ought to die. Then the prophet turned the tables on him. “You are the man,” he said.

David could see the matter so clearly when he thought he was not involved. He was able, through the parable, to see himself from a third party standpoint. He was able to see himself as he appeared to God. He was able to judge fairly and had condemned himself.

This is how parables work. They help us to stand outside ourselves and to look at ourselves objectively. Sometimes we are too close to a situation to make reasoned decisions about it. Maybe we do not see the whole picture. We make allowances for ourselves. Because we are involved, our judgments are prejudiced.

The Parable of the Devil

What the Bible says about the devil is a sort of parable too. There does not exist any fallen angel in opposition to God. God is supreme. Angels cannot sin. Those who believe in fallen angels rely on

verses snatched out of context and misapplied. They take sections of Revelation, the last book, and apply them to the Genesis story. This is no way to treat the Bible.

Yet the Bible does speak of a devil, a blasphemer, and about a satan, one who opposes God. It does not do this so that we may have someone else to blame for our sins. It does this to help us appreciate how wicked we all are. It wants us to see ourselves as God sees us. It wants us to know how easily we can deceive ourselves. We have a tremendous battle on our hands to overcome our own human nature. Jesus said:-

“For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts...”

(Mark 7:21)

The parable pictures of the devil are there to bring home how serious a fight we must wage. It is vital that we overcome our own natural desires if we are to please God.

Jesus often used parables in his teaching. He was able to use graphic illustrations from everyday life in which people could identify themselves. From those he helped men and women to see the real issues in their lives, as they appear to God.

The parable of the good Samaritan tells of the victim of a vicious attack. Those who might have been expected to help did not. A stranger who had no reason to be kind was the one who took pity on him. The story invites us to make comparisons.

We would all like to feel that we would behave as the good Samaritan. In practice we do not. We so often pass by the good things that we could do. We refuse to help because we see no reason why we should. Jesus makes our obligations plain. He presses home the point when he says, “Go and do likewise”.

The parable of the sower is also well known. The seed of the gospel falls on different kinds of earth. On some it takes root and grows well. On others it cannot take root, or it cannot find water. For one reason or another it never matures and yields a harvest.

Looking at Ourselves

Jesus’ words invite self-examination. They demand that we overhaul the stony places of our hearts and root out the weeds from our lives. Only then can the gospel take effect in our lives.

These vivid pictures of the parables help us in a way that words would not. They present the lesson clearly so that we may appreciate its truth. Then there dawns the realisation that each of us must make the application to ourselves.

It is here that the audience begins to disappear. Applying these things can be most uncomfortable. Yet it was for this reason that Jesus used parables. Then, as now, they often sifted his hearers. Some were willing to listen, but could not see that it had anything to do with them. It was always about the other fellow.

It was those with “ears to hear” that Jesus sought. He wanted people prepared to listen and own the truth of what he said. He was looking for people of understanding, willing to consider his message and act on it.

“Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. And in them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says: Hearing you will hear and shall not understand, And seeing you will see and not perceive; For the heart of this people has grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, Their eyes they have closed, Lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, Lest they should understand with their heart and turn, So that I should heal them.”

(Matthew 13:13-15)

There are many other parables in Scripture of course. Some portray different aspects of the kingdom of God. Some are not told, but are acted out in the lives of men and women. Their purpose is always

the same, however. It is that we should seek out the deeper significance for ourselves. Those who seek, God will bless and they will find. It just requires ears that really want to hear.

CHAPTER 23

“WELL I think God is a nice kind old man. He has white hair and a long beard and a lovely smile.”

This child’s view of God, or something very like it, was revealed in a book² some years ago. I have heard young children say similar things in Sunday School. Perhaps you have too.

Sadly, even in adults, this picture of God is all too common. It may be expressed with more sophistication. The same idea of God as a benevolent old man is still there however. It has led to a great deal of sentimentality in religion. It has led also to a lot of “sloppy” thinking.

It is not surprising, then, that many regard Jesus in a similar sort of way. Another book³ I recall reading many years ago set out to correct some wrong impressions. The author confessed that his early picture of Jesus was based on something he had seen on his Sunday School wall. It gave the impression of a weak, soft figure clad in what looked like a long nightdress. Later he came to appreciate that such was not the true Jesus at all.

The Real Jesus

The Jesus of the gospels was no weakling. Gentle and loving he was. With this side of his character were blended strength and toughness too.

Joseph had been a carpenter. At one point in the gospels Jesus too is described in that way. The tools of those days were heavy. It would take great strength and skill to wield them and use them successfully.

Jesus was fit. He walked many miles to and fro. He worked hard amongst the people. The long days drained his energy. He sometimes went without sleep, spending whole nights in prayer. He had little privacy or rest. On occasions, there was scarcely time to eat.

His teaching was challenging. His voice carried authority. When he cleansed the temple, no-one resisted him or got in his way. Soldiers sent to arrest him returned empty handed. “No man ever spoke like this man;” was their lame excuse.

Misleading Pictures

More modern ideas present Jesus in a different way. He is the champion of the vagrants, the leader of reactionaries. This too is misleading. Jesus did not come with a social gospel. He was not a superstar. He came to show people a better way.

It is his strength of purpose more than his physique or his manner that we should-admire. It is the fortitude with which he met scorn and ridicule. It is the way in which, unflinchingly, he faced the cross. The prophets had foretold his suffering. Yet his determination never wavered.

Even quite early in his ministry, Jesus had experienced rejection. He had visited Nazareth. At first he had received an enthusiastic reception. People had heard of his teaching and miracles. Men like to be associated with a hero. They welcomed him and pressed home the fact that he had grown up in their town.

As Jesus began to talk, they were pleasantly surprised by his words. When, however, he began to say that they would be unwilling to receive his teaching, they changed. They quickly became opposed. When he showed that God had turned to the Gentiles in the past, they became angry.

² Teenage Religion by Harold Loukes

³ The Man Nobody Knows by Bruce Barton

Jesus said that they would use a proverb against him. It was "Physician, heal yourself!". They led him out to the top of the hill on which Nazareth was built. They had intended to throw him over as they did with criminals. Jesus, however, escaped. His words were prophetic though. At the cross they threw those words back at him. "He saved others; himself he cannot save." In effect they were repeating the proverb, Saviour, save thyself.

Despite the experience of Nazareth, Jesus did not turn away-from Jerusalem. Luke's gospel shows that he "steadfastly set his face" to go there. It is this courage and determination that makes the picture of a pale and sickly figure so unsuitable. It is his isolation from the crowd that makes the idea of a hero of the masses so untrue.

Yet there was much more to the Lord than strong resolution only. People came to him with different needs. Whatever their need was, it was met and answered in Jesus. No-one ever came to the Lord and found him too busy. None was ever asked to make an appointment or turned away.

Living Water

Take, for example, the woman of Samaria. The disciples had left Jesus by the well. He was tired and hungry and they had gone to buy food in the village. The woman came to draw water. She must have been amazed when Jesus spoke to her. It was not usual for a man to talk to a woman in public. It was very unusual for a Jew to speak to a Samaritan. Yet Jesus did. He cut through the customs of the time to meet a need.

Jesus told her that she would have to draw that water again, and again, and again. He had the fountain of eternal life. The woman was naturally curious and interested. In the conversation that followed, her sorry life was brought into the open.

She had been married a number of times, but now lived with a man who was not her husband. She was ashamed and tried to change the subject. Without having to be told, Jesus knew her past. He could not condone it. Those were not the Lord's standards. Things of that kind cannot be glossed over or swept under the carpet. They are wrong.

Yet they can be put right. The woman went away to tell others that she had found someone who could tell all that ever she did! All that she had done was no sweet story! It brought others though, who also could see in Jesus a saviour. He is the one who can save from the ways of our world, its foolish habits, its topsy-turvy values. He is the only one who can save. If we want to get out of the trough of our sinful ways, Jesus can help.

The Curse of Leprosy

Or take the leper as another example. Here was a man not sunk in the mire of immorality, but just as wretched. A loathsome disease clinging to his skin had made this man an outcast. He was unclean, lonely, living a life of total misery. He may have been like that for years, no-one daring to touch him. He had no-one to give him a loving embrace, much less the warmth of a family or home.

Yet Jesus touched him. He could cleanse the leper and he did. Putting out his hand he touched the man. He restored his flesh, but he did much more than that. He restored the man to society and to life. Jesus can save us from hopelessness if we will trust in his word. If we feel isolated, lonely or despised, Jesus can help.

There is no sin so great that Jesus cannot cleanse and save you. There is no place so far away that Jesus cannot reach out and restore you. You must come in faith that he can help. You must learn of him through his word and obey his teaching.

"Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

(Acts 4:12)

The Problem of Riches

At the other end of the scale was the rich young ruler. He was the man who had everything. If eternal life could be earned then he would have that too for he was a very good man. He ticked off mentally the milestones of his life, yet still felt a need. "What else must I do?" he asked the Lord.

The answer was hard. His need was for sacrifice. "Go, sell what you have and give to the poor..." said the Lord. Life is not complete without personal sacrifice. It is not about possessions as so many seem to think. God's kingdom cannot be earned. We shall always feel that life is lacking something until we see the need to give. Jesus is able to supply the thing our lives are missing. If we are conscious that, despite everything, happiness still eludes us, Jesus can help.

Saul of Tarsus was a brilliant scholar. He was schooled in the law and energetic in living it. He was so certain that he was right. His meeting with the Lord was very late. It was after Jesus had ascended to heaven that he appeared to Saul on the Damascus Road.

Saul was "kicking against the goads", like a stubborn animal fighting its master. He was wildly persecuting the early believers, wrestling against truth and logic. He had need of that dramatic vision to stop him in his tracks. Saul became Paul. Jesus can save us from the folly of self-will. If conscience tells us that we have been trying to swim against the tide of truth, Jesus can help.

These illustrations show that Jesus can change lives, quietly or dramatically. Perhaps your need is to give yourself to his will. Perhaps your need is to stop fighting and face up to the Bible.

Jesus was not soft. True Christians are not spineless. If we can see our need of him, the Lord's own life presents a real challenge. He is powerful, to save.

CHAPTER 24

IT was the most beautiful tree imaginable. Its branches were completely covered with green leaves and flowers of every colour. I had never seen anything quite like it before. I turned with awe to the man responsible for the garden. His mischievous grin made me postpone questions about the tree's variety. I looked again.

The flowers were all different kinds. The leaves were different too. This was no real tree at all! The grower strode over and removed one of the hanging baskets. "It was completely dead," he said, "but it seemed a shame to dig it out. We left the stump and the main branches there, and hung these on it."

Sure enough, the tree was just dead sticks. The leaves and flowers were a series of cleverly concealed baskets giving it its beauty.

The Lord Jesus Christ found the nation of Israel a bit like that. He once told a parable about a fig tree that would not bear fruit. The tree was a symbol of God's people. They professed belief, but did not live it. Their lives were fruitless as far as God was concerned.

"He also spoke this parable: 'A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. Then he said to the keeper of his vineyard, "Look, for three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none. Cut it down; why does it use up the ground?"'"

(Luke 13:6-7)

The three years were those of the Lord's ministry. Quite early in his teaching Jesus had shown the need for change by cleansing the temple. It was a feast time. The custom of people at that feast was to springclean their houses. This was done so that they could keep the law to have no ordinary bread in their homes. It was a time when they ate only a flat bread made without yeast.

A Polluted Temple

Jesus came to the temple which was God's house. He found that there were a lot of things wrong there. The birds and animals sold for sacrifices were not of the best. They could only be bought with special temple currency. Some were apparently cheating in the changing of money too.

Jesus "springcleaned" the temple. He drove them out. He gave them a commandment too.

"Take these things away! Do not make my Father's house a house of merchandise!"

(John 2:16)

The parable of the fig tree which Jesus told shows that three years had made little difference. In God's view, there had been little change. The money changers and the animal sellers were all back in their places. Once again the temple looked more like a market than a place for worship.

In his parable, the Lord had depicted himself as pleading with the owner. He wanted to make one last attempt with the barren tree. This was the last six months of his ministry. He appears to have worked for three and a half years.

Cleansed by the Lord

Then in the last week before his crucifixion, Jesus cleansed the temple again. He came to the city from the village of Bethany. On the way he saw a fig tree full of leaves. Although it was not the time for figs to ripen, on this tree none had even set. The leaves looked fine, but there was not a sign of any fruit. It promised so much and yielded so little. Jesus cursed the tree:-

"Let no one eat fruit from you ever again."

(Mark 11:14)

In the temple at Jerusalem he found the same problems as previously. He drove everyone out. This time, however, there was no commandment. The opportunity for repentance was past. It was too late for Israel now. Instead he said:

"Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it a 'den of thieves'."

(Mark 11:17)

So much was this true that the house was no longer fit for God. A little later Jesus said:

"See! Your house is left to you desolate;"

(Matthew 23:38)

A Withered Tree

The following morning Jesus and the disciples again came into the city from Bethany. It was Peter who noticed that the fig tree had already withered away. It was a miracle. Normally, it is the leaves of a tree that die first. However, this tree had withered from the roots. The fate of the nation was sealed. They had refused to bear fruit in their lives that would honour God. Destruction was now the only remedy for their sin.

Jesus told his disciples about this in what is called the Olivet Prophecy. It is easy to forget that Jesus was a prophet. In reality he was the greatest of all the prophets. He foretold many things including his own death. His prophecy made on the mount of Olives foretold the destruction of Jerusalem. It also told of events still to happen long afterwards.

The disciples had been pointing out the beauty of the temple. They must have been shocked by the Lord's reply:

"Do you not see all these things? Assuredly, I say to you, not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down."

(Matthew 24:2)

Jesus went on to tell them what things to expect. He spoke first of persecution for them as the result of their preaching. Then he said that Jerusalem would be ringed with armies. When that happened, he warned that they should flee.

You may wonder how they could flee if the city was surrounded. The words of Jesus came true. The Romans besieged the city, but then retired for a short period. Faithful followers would then remember their Lord's words and escape. Then the Romans returned and Jerusalem was destroyed.

The Overthrow of Jerusalem

That destruction was the end of the Jewish nation. A few Jews held out in a fortress to the south for a further fifty years or so. The nation, however, was scattered. They had been given every chance to repent. They had not done so. Instead they had killed the Messiah that God had sent. These had been the last days of Jewish opportunity.

Now the gospel would be preached to non-Jews. The Gentiles would have their opportunity to respond to God's word. Jesus' words span more than 1900 years of history:-

"And they" (Jews) "will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led away captive into all nations. And Jerusalem will be trampled by Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled."

(Luke 21:24)

Notice that word "until". The time of opportunity for the other nations is also limited. It is not an indefinite period. Indeed there is evidence to suggest that they have now reached their "last days" too. Jesus had given his first century disciples signs to look for. He gives us an indication of what to expect too.

First he speaks of the state of our world:-

"And there will be signs in the sun, in the moon, and in the stars; and on the earth distress of nations, with perplexity, the sea and the waves roaring; men's hearts failing them from fear and the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth, for the powers of heaven will be shaken."

(Luke 21:25-26)

Then Jesus speaks again of the fig tree. This time he speaks of it beginning to bud and burst into leaf. We have seen how Jesus used the fig tree to stand for Israel. We know that the Jews were scattered in AD 70. In this century, Jews have reassembled in what used to be called Palestine. In 1948 it was declared the State of Israel. The words of Jesus have come true within the last forty years or so.

More and More Trees

Jesus speaks also of "all the trees". Many other nations have also sprung up during that period. Many places have been given independence or have declared themselves a republic. What Jesus prophesied is still coming true.

This means that we are living in the "last days". Do I hear you ask: "Last days before what?" They will end with the coming of Jesus:-

"Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory."

(Luke 21:27)

The nation of Israel we know today must yet be humbled. It will finally accept its Messiah.

“And I will pour on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem the Spirit of grace and supplication; then they will look on me whom they have pierced; they will mourn for him as one mourns for his only son, and grieve for him as one grieves for a first born.”

(Zechariah 12:10)

The work of Jesus will not have been in vain for them. For us, however, there is also the need to prepare for his coming. Jesus rounded off his prophecy with the need for personal preparation. Bible readers are often divided over the precise programme of events. God's timetable is not revealed in every detail. Exactly how the events will unfold is something for discussion.

We are foolish if we miss the point, however. These prophecies are given to help us. Getting lost in debating them is no help. The vital question is whether or not the teaching of Jesus has made us ready to meet him.

CHAPTER 25

THE family had arrived back from the falconry centre. Excitedly they began to tell me about their visit. Among the interesting things they had seen was an owl with only one leg. I forget the kind of owl it was. It was one which only hunts for food as and when it needs to eat. It may not eat for several days and so will lose weight. This loss in body weight is the mechanism which triggers its instinct to hunt again.

It was not hard to imagine that, through an accident, this owl had become very vulnerable. The loss of a limb had upset the balance of its life in more ways than one. Its instincts were not running true. It was disorientated. It didn't know when to hunt or eat. Left out in the wild it would certainly have died. In captivity it was fed, healthy and safe.

The disciples were often very vulnerable without Jesus. Early in his ministry Jesus had chosen twelve disciples. From those who followed him, these were to be specially close and with him all the time.

Choosing Twelve

Jesus chose them carefully. He spent many hours in prayer first. He wanted the choice to be his Father's. Among them would be one who would eventually betray his master.

The disciples were far from perfect. They had many faults. They argued amongst themselves. They even debated who was the greatest while Jesus was still with them! They let him down. Yet they were company and help to him.

“But you are those who have continued with me in my trials.”

(Luke 22:28)

Matthew had been a tax collector. He would be hated by most Jews and regarded as a traitor. He collected the taxes for Rome. It was a job that was usually very lucrative through extortion.

Simon had been a zealot. They were rebels, anxious to overthrow the Romans. They wanted to regain control of their own country and destiny.

Peter and several others were fishermen. They were simple and trusting, but rugged and strong. They all had this in common that they had left everything to follow Jesus.

They were all teachable too. They had been chosen with a very great work in mind. They did not know it then, but they were to be trained for a most important destiny.

THE LORD JESUS

"Assuredly I say to you, that in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit everlasting life."

(Matthew 19:28-29)

The words disciple and discipline are closely related. This is what their calling was about. They had much to learn. They were to be trained for the kingdom of God. Men hardened and set in their ways would have been no use.

Peter had been out fishing all night when Jesus first called him. He had caught nothing. Jesus told him to try again and a miraculous haul of fish was the result. If Peter had doubted whether Jesus knew anything about fish, his doubts were removed. He felt inadequate in the presence of this one who appeared to know all things.

"When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!' For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish which they had taken;"

(Luke 5:8-9)

Jesus did not depart. Peter and the others learnt that Jesus was able to supply their need. The ferocity of the storm on the Sea of Galilee made them afraid. They woke their sleeping master in panic. They marvelled at his faith and power in stilling the wind and calming the sea. Fear was replaced by confidence, as long as he was with them.

Where Else Shall We Go?

Later, when others found the going too hard, Jesus gave the twelve the chance to leave him. It was Peter who, this time, would not depart from his Lord:-

"Then Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.'"

(John 6:68)

Peter knew they could not just "go". It was unthinkable that they should drift. Life needs an anchor, a destination. They must have somewhere or someone to go to. For them that destination was Jesus Christ.

There were times when being a disciple of Jesus was hard. The crowd were often enthusiastic about Jesus' work and the disciples glad to be involved. At other times Jesus' teaching and actions brought them into contact with the Jewish authorities.

For example, Jesus' attitude to the sabbath caused them problems. Jesus did not break the sabbath, though many felt he did. He showed men its true purpose. He showed that it was the best day of all for doing God's work. He often chose the sabbath for the work of healing and salvation. It was the day that pointed forward to the "rest" from sin that Jesus would obtain. In Jesus the sabbath was fulfilled. He is our rest and the sabbath no longer needs to be kept.

Yet the religious leaders of those days murmured at the disciples. Afraid often to speak against Jesus, they would criticise his followers. The disciples could not always answer. They did not always understand.

They did not understand when Jesus told them of his death. He said plainly that he was to be killed, but they could not see how this was to be.

The Transfiguration

On a mountain away from the crowds, Jesus received great glory from God. Peter, James and John only were with him as he was transfigured into the beauty of an age to come. Moses and Elijah also appeared in glory and talked with him about his decease.

Jesus must have found this occasion one of great strength. It was “for the joy that was set before him (that) he endured the cross, despising the shame”. He saw beyond the cross to the glory that awaited him.

The incident provided a teaching situation for the disciples too. Moses had died outside the promised land. He could not enter the kingdom immediately, just at the end of his life. The disciples had to learn that Jesus was not to establish his kingdom immediately. He must die first.

Elijah had been taken away towards heaven so that no-one knew of his death or burial. The disciples needed to know that Jesus also must go away to heaven and come again to fulfil what the prophets had said.

The Last Supper

The night he was arrested Jesus had a last meal with his disciples. It was a few hours before the Jews were celebrating the feast of passover. That feast was a reminder of the way God had brought His people out of the slavery of Egypt.

The feast Jesus ate with his disciples was not a passover. He made radical alterations to show that they should remember something more important. They were to remember that, through him, God would deliver them from being slaves to sin.

At one point in the meal Jesus took a basin and towel. He began to wash the feet of his disciples. Though he was greater than they, he humbled himself to perform this common courtesy for them. Peter was ashamed. He realised then that they should have done this for Jesus. He refused to allow Jesus to wash his feet. Jesus pointed out that it was essential if Peter was to have any close association with him. Peter relented.

The Betrayer

Judas did not. He did allow Jesus to wash his feet. Jesus no doubt bestowed the same tender care on his feet as on all the others. Even at this late stage, Jesus would wish still that Judas would repent of his intentions. Judas was determined however. He left the gathering to betray his master.

After the main meal, Jesus took a piece of bread. He shared it with his disciples saying that it represented his body. It was given for them. He shared his cup of wine with them too. He said that it was his blood, poured out, to take away sins. Jesus commanded that these emblems of his death should be used to remember him.

“...do this in remembrance of me.”

(Luke 22:19)

“For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till he comes.”

(1 Corinthians 11:26)

Jesus prayed for his disciples too. He prayed that they should continue in what was true. He asked God to guard them and keep them from the world.

Then Jesus prayed for others who would believe right down the centuries to our day. We too need to be teachable if we are to follow him. We must be willing to let our lives be moulded and shaped by his teaching. Disciples, by definition, are learners.

Out of the city and across the valley the little group made its way. At the garden of Gethsemane Jesus prayed. The disciples fell asleep.

Jesus wrestled with his will. His natural desire was to escape the crucifixion. He toiled to bring his own feelings into subjection to God's will. It was no easy battle. It was no pretend conflict. Jesus was not God. His perspiration came like great drops of blood, so real and so hard was the conflict. Still the disciples were unaware.

They were awake when the soldiers came. No doubt from the best motives, Peter lashed out with a sword. The Lord condemned his action:-

“Put your sword in its place, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.”

(Matthew 26:52)

And the disciples forsook him and fled.

CHAPTER 26

I SHALL never forget the first time I visited a prison.

I remember the long wait to be let in, the form filling and being checked out again at the end. We were herded like animals to the visits block with wardens and dogs at front and rear of the party. The windows were tiny, the walls bare and the whole place very cold.

Some prisons are much better. There is tight security, of course. Closed circuit television monitors every move. Automatic doors control the flow of people. Generally, however, things are fairly pleasant and relaxed.

The prisons of Bible days were much worse. The worst today would be a palace compared with those. Most of them were dungeons. They had no light and no facilities. Men were shackled to the wall or left in darkness to sink into mire and dirt.

Jesus once used verses from the Old Testament to show that he had come to release prisoners. Part of his work was to open the prison and to free the captives. He did not do this literally. He did not try to rescue even his cousin from King Herod's jail. He came to provide an escape for all of us from the prisonhouse of life.

As bad as conditions were in those days, their effect was no worse than the imprisonment we all suffer. The worst thing about us is that we often fail to realise that we are imprisoned. We seem to enjoy great freedom. Compared with others, most are fairly comfortable. It is easy to forget that life is a prison.

Jesus told the Jews:

“If you abide in my word, you are my disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”

(John 8:31-32)

The Jews did not feel any need of this help either. Like so many of us, they were unaware of being in bondage. Jesus pointed out:

“Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin.”

(John 8:34)

Freed Slaves

So, we each need Jesus to free us. We are imprisoned by our selfishness. We are slaves to our own desires. We have been captured by our own sinful natures and their captives we remain without Jesus' help. How is Jesus able to help? How is he able to free captives and release prisoners?

There was a time when Jesus suffered the same imprisonment that we share. Jesus did not sin, but he shared human nature with us. He was a prisoner to death just as we are.

For this reason Jesus needed to be saved. Even if he had not been murdered, he could not have lived for ever. From his mother, Mary, he inherited mortality. He was subject to pain and suffering. He was

growing old. He would have died. Here is a verse that shows that Jesus needed to be saved from death:

“who, in the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to him who was able to save him from death, and was heard because of his godly fear,”

(Hebrews 5:7)

Jesus was not a prisoner to sin. He lived a sinless life. Yet he was imprisoned by the human nature he inherited from Adam. He shared what the Bible calls a “body of death”.

“But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?”

(Romans 7:23-24)

This illustrates the need for Jesus to die for himself. All through his life Jesus remained sinless. He fought against temptation and won. He overcame the human tendency to do wrong. When he died, that died. When he was put to death, his human nature was put to death too.

A Sacrifice

His willing death as a sacrifice was made on his own behalf as well as on ours. God had condemned human nature. He passed the death sentence on Adam and on all his race. God’s sentence was just. Jesus’ death showed the truth of what God had said. It demonstrated His righteousness.

Yet Jesus had not personally sinned. He had done nothing to earn death. That is why God saved him from death. God raised him up to new life. Jesus cannot now die. He has eternal life.

It is because Jesus overcame his own human nature that he is able to help us. It is because he was victorious over sin that we can share his victory. It is because God has saved him that he can help to save us.

Although we have sinned God will count us as sinless if we admit our sin and accept the work of Christ. God will regard our faith in him and his work in lieu of a sinless life. He will drop all charges against us. He will grant us a state of righteousness with Him. God will regard us as righteous.

Paul expressed it like this:-

“... that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith;”

(Philippians 3:8-9)

Here are some verses that bring together these important teachings:-

“... the righteousness of God which is through faith in Jesus Christ to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God sent forth to be a propitiation by his blood, through faith, to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time his righteousness, that he might be the just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”

(Romans 3:22-26)

Notice the points that are made here:

v.22 Righteousness is through faith in Jesus Christ. It is attributed to believers.

v.23 Everyone has sinned. This means that we all stand in need of the righteousness that only God can provide in Jesus.

v.24 Being justified (counted for righteous) is free. It comes by the grace of God (for those who show faith as at v.22 above).

v.25 The death of Jesus demonstrates God's righteousness. It shows His willingness to overlook the sins of those who accept Jesus' sacrifice in faith.

v.26 God is both just and the one who justifies such people of faith.

This summary may need reading twice. It may not be easy to grasp at one reading. It is quite different from what most people imagine the Bible to say.

It is widely taught that God was so angry with sinners that Jesus died to appease His wrath. God accepted Jesus' sacrifice in payment for the sins of men and women. He died in place of them. They then could go free. These are common beliefs, but they are foreign to the Bible.

First there is no indication that Jesus had to pacify God in any way. Such an idea is in conflict with the most well known of all Bible verses:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life."

(John 3:16)

It is true that God hates sin. His wrath will be poured out on those who remain in their wickedness. Men and women who will not repent will deserve His anger. It was in love, however, that God gave Jesus to save us. The verses above show that it is God Himself who will justify us.

True Forgiveness

Secondly, there is nothing in scripture about Jesus paying our debt. If there were, it would make nonsense of the idea of God's forgiveness.

Imagine that Bill owes me £5. Jack comes along and gives me the fiver to settle it. I have not let Bill off his debt, or showed him any mercy. I have received payment in full. Yet the verses above say that we can be justified freely, by the grace of God. It is God's mercy that removes our sins. They are forgiven in Christ, not paid for. Jesus' own parable (Luke 7:42) says that the debtors had "nothing with which to pay". Their Lord "freely forgave them".

Thirdly, the Bible does not teach that Jesus died in place of other men and women. If it did, this too would seriously call in question the righteousness of God. Where is any justice in making the only one who did not sin die so that sinners can go free? What is right about letting those who sinned get away with it?

The Bible does say that Jesus died for us. It does not say that he died instead of us. If he had died instead of us, we would not need to die. The verses from Romans say that the death of Jesus demonstrates God's righteousness. We must now look at what happened at Jesus' death and how his sacrifice can help us.

CHAPTER 27

AS the sun sank behind the hill, there could be seen the figure of a man silhouetted against the sky. His arms were outstretched towards heaven. Two others were with him, one on either side.

It was Moses. Israel's battle against enemy forces was won when Moses' hands were lifted up towards heaven. The victory was God's. The place was given a name which means "The LORD is my banner".

Another "banner" was hoisted in the wilderness when Israel themselves had sinned. God had sent serpents because of the people's murmuring. People died as a result of the serpent's bite. It was a grim reminder of the fatality of sin. "The wages of sin is death."

A Serpent on a Pole

There was no remedy. Sacrifices were no help. God alone could provide a way out. He commanded Moses to make a bronze serpent and hoist it on a pole. Those who looked to that pole in faith could live.

Jesus said that this incident showed the need for his death. Moses had lifted up the serpent in the wilderness when there had been no other way of escape. It was essential that Jesus should be lifted up on a cross. There was no other way of salvation.

"And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

(John 3:14-15)

"And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to myself."

(John 12:32)

He is the "banner" that God has placed. He is the rallying point to draw men and women of faith. It is faith in him that saves.

"And his name, through faith in his name, has made this man strong,.. Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

(Acts 3:16; 4:12)

Sin and Guilt

This lesson had been taught by God from earliest times. When Adam and Eve had sinned, they had become aware of guilt. For the first time they felt ashamed. They took immediate steps to hide. They covered their nakedness with a cloak made of leaves, but this was not sufficient.

God replaced it with a better covering. It was one that involved death, the death of an animal. It showed the principle that sin results in death. Blood must be shed before sin can be effectively covered. God made them coats of skin.

In the generations that followed faithful men worshipped God by means of animal sacrifices. It was not that the animals could save them. They did not imagine that God would accept innocent animals, unaware of right and wrong, in place of the sinner. There would have been no justice in such an arrangement.

The New Testament says:

"For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins."

(Hebrews 10:4)

In such sacrifices, however, the offerer saw himself. The animal represented him. He was often closely associated with it, placing his hand on its head and confessing his sins. In the animal's death, he saw his own death. It was a demonstration of what he deserved. It was also a demonstration of his faith that God would provide a perfect sacrifice. That sacrifice would be able to remove sin for ever. On that faith God took his sin away.

When the faith was not present the sacrifice was useless. God condemned what became mere ritual. Faith in His willingness and ability to provide a perfect sacrifice pleased God. He regarded that as man's righteousness.

The perfect sacrifice could not be a dumb animal. It had to be something capable of sin, yet sinless. It needed to be one who, given the freedom to choose, chose what was right. It had to be one who, from willingness, honoured God by keeping His laws.

Only One Perfect Sacrifice

It was Jesus. Jesus was the perfect sacrifice. Jesus met all the necessary qualifications. He was described by John the Baptist.

"The next day John saw Jesus coming towards him, and said, 'Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!'"

(John 1:29)

The battle in which Moses played such a vital part spoke of God's continual fight against sin. Sin, and its consequence death, are the arch-enemies of God. He yearns for the salvation of those who love Him. It must be on His terms for He hates sin. Yet He loves the sinner who repents and turns to Him.

In this we see two aspects of God's character working for us. His righteousness and His love were both needed to save men and women from death.

There is a great gulf between God and men. Sin divorces us from God. It keeps us apart. It is the life and work of the Lord Jesus Christ which bridges the gap. He "reconciles" us to God.

When a marriage breaks down there may be faults on both sides. Reconciling the parties will mean that both must be willing to forgive. Both may need to make concessions. With God there is no sin. Men and women have moved away from God. He is entirely righteous.

The sacrifice of Jesus, therefore, had to demonstrate God's righteousness.

The Bible says of Jesus:

"whom God set forth to be a propitiation by his blood, through faith, to demonstrate his righteousness,..."

(Romans 3:25)

This was done by condemning the human nature which Jesus shared:

"For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh."

(Romans 8:3)

Jesus was in the likeness of sinful flesh even though he did not personally sin. God condemned sin in the flesh, that is, in the man Jesus Christ. That is why the apostle says again:

"And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked words, yet now he has reconciled in the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy,..."

(Colossians 1:21-22)

Jesus' death, undertaken voluntarily, was an offering for sin. It provided atonement, making us at one with God. It upheld the righteousness of God. God was right to condemn sin and require atonement for it. It is in this way that we are reconciled to Him.

"when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son,..."

(Romans 5:10)

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This vindication of God's righteousness is important as being the basis of our being at one with God. In addition to His righteousness God also displayed His great love. He made the supreme sacrifice. He gave His only son to save men and women.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life."

(John 3:16)

Jesus too made the sacrifice of his own life. He could have avoided death if he had wished. He could have called legions of angels to his assistance to escape. He said:

"As the Father knows me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep."

(John 10:15)

He was the lamb of God and yet a shepherd, giving his life for others. He was the sacrifice and yet a priest making the offering of himself.

Jesus knew when his time had come. He was not caught unawares. He had completed all that God had wanted him to do. When the soldiers came with Judas Iscariot, Jesus was ready to go.

A Rigged Trial

He was taken first to the High Priest. Meekly Jesus suffered the taunts and ill treatment. The prophet Isaiah had said:-

"He was oppressed and he was afflicted, Yet he opened not his mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, And as a sheep before its shearers is silent, So he opened not his mouth."

(Isaiah 53:7)

So Jesus remained silent, listening to them contradicting one another. They argued and lied. Jesus spoke only when commanded by oath to do so. He suffered their spitting and a beating.

He was taken to Pilate, the Roman governor. Pilate could find no reason for passing the death sentence. He knew that it was jealousy that had resulted in his being charged.

Then Pilate learned that Jesus belonged to the province of Galilee. He therefore sent him to King Herod's Jerusalem quarters. Herod and his soldiers mocked Jesus similarly. He was subjected to more abuse and contempt and sent back to Pilate.

No Escape For Pilate

The governor made some attempt to secure his release. He could see that Jesus was innocent. When mention was made of reporting the matter to Caesar, however, Pilate gave in. He washed his hands to signify that he wanted nothing to do with the affair. Yet he delivered Jesus to the mercy of the Jewish leaders. Pilate's soldiers took him away to a criminal's death at Calvary.

Jesus was unable to bear the weight of his cross. The soldiers compelled someone to help him carry it. At the end of the road the nails were hammered through the Lord's hands and feet. The stake was hoisted and dropped roughly into its hole. Still it was his love and not the nails which held the Lord there.

Calvary

There were two others there too, one on either side of the Lord. I am often asked about the thief on the cross. Why did Jesus promise that he would be in paradise? How can we say that baptism is important when this man was not baptised?

Here is the Bible record of what was said, starting with the thief rebuking the other criminal:-

“Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.’ Then he said to Jesus, ‘Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom’. And Jesus said to him, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.’”

(Luke 23:40-43)

Notice the steps that this man takes in what he says:-

1. He admits that he has sinned and deserves death.
2. He admits that Jesus has done nothing wrong. He is sinless.
3. He believes that Jesus can save him and asks his help.
4. He believes that Jesus will come again as a king.

These are things that the Bible shows are essential before people are baptised. They must recognise that they have sinned and want forgiveness. They must realise that Jesus did not sin and can save them. They must also express their faith in the kingdom of God which Jesus is to bring at his coming.

The thief did all the right things, but could not be baptised. Yet he did something better. He died with Jesus. Baptism is a symbol of dying with Jesus. The Bible says:-

“Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death?... knowing this, that our old man was crucified with him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin.”

(Romans 6:3,6)

True Baptism

Baptism is like the people of the Old Testament putting a hand on their animal sacrifice. It is the way in which we associate ourselves with Jesus' sacrifice. He has done his work. We must be related to what he has done in the way he commanded.

What we do in this symbolic way, the thief did in reality. We “die” with Jesus, by a momentary burial in water. The thief died literally with the Lord he had just owned. He is the exception that proves the rule. He is the one who shows the importance of baptism.

No wonder then that Jesus made so great a promise to him. Many wild speculations have been made about what Jesus meant. One common assumption is that paradise is heaven, though the word only means a garden. Jesus did not go to heaven that day. He went to the grave (the Bible calls it hell) for three days.

His promise to the thief was a reassurance that his conversion was accepted. Adam had lost the garden of Eden through his sin. God had said that in the day he sinned, he would die. Corruption resulting in death set in from that very day. His fate was sealed when he disobeyed God.

Jesus had been obedient. He had succeeded where Adam failed. He had won back the blessings of Eden. From that day, the victory was assured. Jesus told the thief that he too could share it. He will share it when Jesus comes in his kingdom.

Prophesied Long Before!

So many of these events at the cross took place exactly as the prophets had said. Jesus would find comfort in seeing God's word come true. In the most remarkable detail the psalms and prophecies had spoken of what would happen. They had spoken of the tearing and sharing of his clothes. They had foretold that the soldiers would throw dice for his cloak, woven in one piece. They had mentioned the mocking. They had said he would be offered a pain-killing drink. All these precise details came true.

No-one could have foreseen their accuracy when they were written hundreds of years earlier. The prophecies pointed to death by crucifixion. Yet the Jews did not practise this. To them it was abominable. Crucifixion was the Roman method of execution. No-one could have foreseen that at the time of Jesus the Romans would occupy the Jews' land.

Even more amazing is the fact that all this could happen at all. The Jews were expecting a Messiah. They had been many years awaiting his coming. Who would have imagined that when he came they would reject him? Yet this too was foretold in the scripture.

The irony of the situation is that those same scriptures denounced the Jews for this act. They spoke of their wickedness in murdering the Son of God. Yet it was those same scriptures that the Jews guarded so jealously. They had preserved the very documents that condemned them. Here is another evidence to the truth and reliability of the Bible.

At the foot of the cross others watched. The leaders watched with jaundiced eyes. They sneered, satisfied at having achieved their purpose. They were heavily prejudiced against the Lord and glad to be rid of him.

The women watched out of love and sadness. They remembered the wonderful miracles. They thought of his gracious words. They were prejudiced in a different way. They mourned the loss of a leader, a friend, their Lord.

The Roman centurion watched too. He was a hard-bitten soldier, tough leader of a hundred men. This was just another job of work to him. His was the most unbiased observation.

"Now when the centurion saw what had happened, he glorified God, saying, 'Certainly this was a righteous man!'"

(Luke 23:47)

CHAPTER 28

THERE is something in our house we call "Mug's Law". That's the law which, if I'm late for work, says that all the traffic lights will be on red! The same law is in operation if I break a plate. It is sure to be one of a set that cannot be replaced!

There are many other principles in Mug's law. Visitors will always arrive when the house is in its worst state of chaos! Rain is most likely on my day off! And so on...

In some houses it goes by a different name, but I think you will recognise Mug's Law. Every home knows its effects. I have never seen it written out anywhere. I imagine, however, that there is also a clause about accidents. I would guess that if you were looking for witnesses, Mug's Law would see to it that there were none. Everyone would have blinked at that exact moment or have looked the other way.

The Greatest Miracle Ever

There was no shortage of witnesses who saw the risen Lord however. It was to the embarrassment of the Jewish leaders that there were all too many. Jesus Christ rose from the dead.

It will not do to pretend that experienced Roman soldiers made a mistake. It makes no sense to claim that he was examined and certified dead, but was not. It is foolish to suggest that a man so cruelly treated could revive after three days in a freezing tomb. It would have been impossible anyway for him then to roll away the huge stone door. Four women had debated who might shift its great weight for them.

It is nonsense to suggest that the disciples could have removed the body. The disciples were frightened men. Perplexed and disillusioned, they tried to come to terms with Jesus' death. They had placed so much trust in him. They had thought he was Messiah. Then their hopes had been dashed and their own lives put in danger.

Peter, especially, was overcome with remorse at having denied his Lord. It is laughable to believe that they could have got past the special guard on the tomb. It is fanciful to claim that they could then have convinced the world that Jesus was alive. It is just plain silly to accept that they would then suffer and die to support such a trick. Even though this was the version of the story the Pharisees preferred, it was clearly far from true.

It is clutching at straws to suggest that the Pharisees themselves removed the body. Why then did they have to struggle to stifle the work of the disciples? Why could they not just produce the body? That would have ended all preaching about the resurrection.

Where Was It?

There is no doubt that the body of Jesus had miraculously disappeared. It could not be accounted for. There is no reasonable explanation of its disappearance. That is why some have called the resurrection the best attested fact of history. Here is what the Bible says:

“...Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he rose again, the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve. After that he was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep. After that he was seen by James, then by all the apostles. Then last of all he was seen by me also...”

(1 Corinthians 15:3-8)

When Paul wrote these words, over half of those he mentioned were still alive. There were at least 250 people who could be contacted and questioned. Three days after his death, Jesus Christ was alive again.

No Doubt Who It Was

He was a recognisable Jesus too. He was not a mere spirit form which might have been imagined. It was the body that was missing from the tomb. It was in that body raised to new life and made glorious that Jesus appeared.

It was not a body still emaciated by the effects of torture and execution. It is not now a body fed by blood cells subject to disease and death. It is a body energised by God's spirit, undying and eternal. Yet it is a body.

Jesus came to his disciples. He came when the door was locked. He appeared in the room. He invited Thomas to touch him. He could have felt the marks of the nails in his hands or the place where he was speared.

Jesus appeared on the road to a nearby village. He said the grace at a meal with two of his disciples. They recognised his characteristic gestures and realised who he was.

He appeared on the sea shore. He had lit a fire there and prepared a meal for some of the disciples. He ate with them there.

It is this risen Lord who is our Lord. It is the risen Christ who gives our lives meaning and hope. It is in Jesus that we can live.

The Reality of Death

Death is an unpleasant fact. There is no escaping its reality. Yet there is a way out. God has shown what that way is by raising Jesus.

There is no comfort in believing something that is not true. Unfounded speculation, not supported by the Bible, is no help. The idea of living on at death is outside Bible teaching. The possibility of the soul going to be with God in heaven is not in the scriptures. The true hope of the Christian lies in resurrection.

The Bible promises that those who love God will be raised to life again. That life will not be the sad frustrations of mortality. It will be an eternal happiness based on the pattern of their Lord.

Jesus was the first. The Bible describes him as the first-fruits. It is a phrase that anticipates more to come. It looks forward to a harvest of believers.

“But now Christ has risen from the dead, and has become the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since by man came death, by man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order: Christ the first-fruits, afterwards those who are Christ’s at his coming.”

(1 Corinthians 15:20-23)

Many find this teaching about resurrection incredible. Yet Abraham, Job, David, Jesus and others believed it. Elijah, Elisha, our Lord, Peter and Paul raised people to life.

Solomon spoke of the grave never being satisfied. It has “gobbled” men and women up all down the ages, but now the tables are turned. God has overcome the enemies of sin and death through the work of Jesus. Death itself is “swallowed up” in victory. That victory we can share.

That is why the apostles speak of people who have “fallen asleep”. It is not a polite veiling of brutal facts. It is the way God sees the issue. Those who ignore God die for ever. Those who love God merely “sleep”, awaiting the time when Jesus will raise them.

Waiting For Life

Their waiting is not hard. They know nothing at all. Death is an unconscious state of sleep. Their wait will not seem long.

Faith in God’s promise of resurrection is important. It affects the present as well. It means that death is not the cause of so much sorrow. It may be a time of grief for those who are bereaved and have to face life alone. Yet we can see our loved ones again if we and they “are Christ’s at his coming”.

“But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you should sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with him those who sleep in Jesus.”

(1 Thessalonians 4:13-14)

CHAPTER 29

IF you have ever travelled by air you will know that there are a number of security checks. One involves placing your handbag or briefcase on a conveyor belt. It then goes through a little tunnel. The contents are X-rayed and show up on a little screen nearby. It’s fascinating to see the inner depths of your bag revealed without it being opened.

Some years ago a group of us were touring a confectionery works. A similar machine was in use there. Packaged goods were examined before despatch. The “camera” could see through the cardboard outer, the wrapper and the inner foil. The bare biscuits were shown neatly stacked and no sign of any “foreign bodies”!

I imagine the judgment of Jesus to be a little like that. We shall not be put j through machines of course, but we shall not be able to hide from him. His piercing eyes will penetrate our hearts and minds. Everything will be clearly visible to him.

Yet there are verses in the scriptures which say things like this:

“Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling, And to present you faultless Before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy,..”

(Jude:24)

Judgment by God

Imagine it! The searching glory of God is thousands of times more powerful than any LIM light or X-ray. Yet we can be found faultless in its beam. The word means without a flaw. There will be nothing untoward shown up.

It's not that we are faultless, but that Jesus is able to present us in that way to God. Even now he is a priest in heaven. He pleads with God for us so that when we are sorry for our sins we may be forgiven. He is a mediator, or middleman, between God and ourselves. He is there to intercede for us. By this means we can be at one with God.

This is why, when we pray, we should pray through Jesus Christ our Lord. We sinners have no access to God's presence in our own right. We are able to come to God only because of the work of Jesus. When, in prayer, we say "for Christ's sake", we acknowledge this. It is a shortened way of saying that we ask that God will hear us for the sake of Christ.

Eternal Life or Death?

When Jesus raises the dead at his coming it is to hold judgment. He will judge men and women and divide them. Some will be judged fit for eternal life and some not. Jesus' teaching and parables make this very plain. The idea of judgment is considered old-fashioned today. However, it is part of God's purpose whatever we may think.

Jesus will be concerned with effort more than with achievement however. If we are associated with his sacrifice through true baptism, our sins will be erased. His righteousness will save those who through faith and love have done their best.

No-one will be good enough on their own, of course! No-one will deserve His blessing or be able to earn His favour. The blessing is God's gift. It will be stained only by His grace.

Not everyone will be raised and judged. There are some who have never known of God. Some have not had the opportunity that we enjoy of learning about Him. Some have not the ability to understand. It would be unjust to hold them responsible. It would be unfair to condemn them as guilty. Their life and memory is a thing of the past and will stay so.

Not all those who are raised will be given Jesus' blessing. It makes a mockery of judgment to believe that everyone will automatically be saved. They will not. Jesus taught plainly that the majority would not. He said there would be few.

This is why we should never worry about being in a minority. Some people find it hard to accept that so many can be wrong. They feel unable to stand out from the crowd. They are uneasy about belonging to a small group.

Not Everyone

Time and time again, however, the Bible reminds us that faith is a minority thing. Only Noah's family were saved at the flood. Only Lot and his family came out of Sodom (and not all of them). We have to take seriously the words of our Lord:

"Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it."

(Matthew 7:13-14)

There are many people today who would not be comfortable in the presence of Jesus. They do not want him in their lives now. They would not be happy with him then. They will not be in his kingdom either.

It was the kingdom of God that was uppermost in the minds of the disciples as they talked with Jesus. It was about six weeks after the resurrection. Jesus had led them out once again to the mount of Olives.

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“... they asked him, saying, ‘Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?’”

(Acts 1:6)

Jesus pointed out that the times are in God’s hands. They had work to do for him. He gave them their commission to be witnesses and to preach. Then he ascended to heaven.

They were not wrong about the kingdom, however. Jesus had many times spoken of it and of his return. Here is one example:

“A certain nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and to return.”

(Luke 19:12)

As Jesus was taken from the disciples, angels repeated the same promise:-

“Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw him go into heaven.”

(Acts 1:11)

The significance of those words has been lost on many people. Of those who regard themselves as believers, few actually expect Jesus to come back. Some feel that the disciples were naive and mistaken. Others think that Jesus was referring to the holy spirit. A few claim that the Greek word “coming” really refers to a spiritual appearance.

This is very sad. Jesus and the disciples spoke plainly enough. Their words lead us to expect that Jesus will return literally and in person to the earth.

The New Testament word for “coming” can refer to a spiritual presence. It is also often used in a literal way. Paul was comforted by the coming of his friends through their company, not through his imagination of them. Jesus sent the holy spirit to strengthen and assist his disciples in their work. Even after that had come, however, they still expected Jesus himself.

We have read the promise of the angels in Acts chapter 1. The holy spirit was received in Acts chapter 2. Now here are some words of Peter from Acts chapter 3:-

“Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before, whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, of which God has spoken...”

(Acts 3:19-21)

Jesus is in heaven only until God sends him back to restore all things.

Jesus ascended from the mount of Olives, taken up into heaven in a cloud. This same Jesus will return as he went, a literal Jesus, in a cloud. He once said:-

“... and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.”

(Matthew 24:30)

One of the prophets said:-

“And in that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, Which faces Jerusalem on the east, And the Mount of Olives shall be split in two, From east to west, Making a very large valley;”

(Zechariah 14:4)

This simple message has been further confused by the modern idea that the kingdom of God is also a spiritual concept. Some feel it will exist only in the hearts of believers. They teach that those who accept Jesus as their ruler and head are his kingdom.

The Real Kingdom of God

It is right that we must make Jesus our king now, but there is more to the kingdom than this. Jesus has been promised the throne of David in Jerusalem. God promised Abraham that all nations of the earth would be blessed through him. Jesus said that the "meek shall inherit the earth". He taught us to pray "thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth..."

Nor will this be brought about by man's efforts. It cannot be the result of a gradual process. Prayer alone cannot make the world a better place. God has shown that the world will get worse. Jesus will come at a time of unprecedented trouble. The kingdom will only be the result of divine intervention.

After the resurrection and judgment Jesus will rule the world. Those he has counted as righteous will help him. They will enjoy the blessing of immortality, Their bodies will know no ageing process and no disease.

Yet the kingdom is only a bridge. It is not the end. There will be others to whom God gives the opportunity to know Him. They will still suffer mortality. They will be sinners still needing to learn God's ways. Those who have been made immortal will teach and rule them. The Bible describes their work as kings and priests with Christ.

This kingdom of God under Jesus will last for a millennium, or thousand years. At the end of that time sin will be entirely removed for ever. Even death will be abolished. God Himself will then be able to live with immortal men and women. He will be everything in everyone.

"Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when he puts an end to all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign till he has put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that will be destroyed is death ... Now when all things are made subject to him, then the Son himself will also be subject to him who put all things under him, that God may be all in all."

(1 Corinthians 15:24-28)

This completes our brief survey of the life of our Lord. He was a child of promise. Miraculously born of the virgin Mary, Jesus was son of man and Son of God. We have looked at some of his gracious work and considered the challenge of his teaching. We have glimpsed some of those who met him and loved him, and have shared their experiences.

We should marvel at his obedience to the Father's will. We should be moved by his perfect life, his willing death as a sacrifice for sin and his glorious resurrection. Jesus sits now in glory at the right hand of God. He bears God's name and is worthy of all praise and honour.

Jesus' last words are contained in the book of Revelation. This is a message about the events which would result in his return and kingdom. It shows that there will be momentous events facing the nations. Those who understand the truth and belong to Christ have no need to fear. They can say with the writer of that book:-

"Even so, come, Lord Jesus!"

(Revelation 22:20)

CHAPTER 30

JAYNE looked at me amazed!

We had been talking about creation. I had pointed out that God made everything for His own pleasure. Jayne had obviously not thought about that before because she suddenly stopped dead in her tracks.

Did I really mean to say that we are only here to please God?

I replied that I thought that was the purpose in our being created. Somehow Jayne could not quite come to terms with that. I suppose she is fairly typical of a lot of people. It has just never occurred to them that we may not be alive to please ourselves.

To most people life is just for us. Its aim is to find happiness, to live well, to look after self. If, on the way, we may do a good turn for others as well, then many will be glad to do that. But for Mr. Average, life is for him.

No wonder, then, that it is something of a shock to find that life is not about ME after all! So what is life about? What is its purpose? Why are we here?

This is a very basic question. It is surprising that it needs to be asked. It is even more surprising that so few appear able to answer it.

The Secret of True Happiness?

I once heard that a brains trust were asked what was the secret of true happiness, and were stumped! Think of it! Some of the best brains in the country, able to answer the most amazing things, but beaten by something as important and elementary as this.

If we want to know why anything has been made it is sensible to ask the one who made it. Nothing is created without a reason. From a cake to a car or a pot to a palace, there is reason behind its manufacture.

Someone once said that we should have nothing in our homes which we do not “know to be useful or believe to be beautiful”. That may, or may not, be good advice. Most of the things we make, however, fall into one of those two categories. They are made either to be useful in some way. Or they are made as objects of admiration and beauty.

And to serve either of those two purposes, things have to be designed. There has to be thought. Planning goes into their creation or construction. Materials are prepared. Work is done in a particular order. Mistakes will spoil the end product. If it is neither useful nor beautiful when finished, we shall not want it. The chances are it will be broken up or thrown away.

The Bible speaks of God making man in this way:-

“Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’”

(Genesis 1:26)

Both things we have mentioned are involved here. First, God wanted to make man in His image. That means He wanted man to be like Him in some way. Today we speak of being “Godly”. The word has been shortened and means God-like.

Why God Created Man

God wanted men to be like Him. That would give Him pleasure. It gives all fathers pleasure to see a son following in their footsteps. God wanted His children to honour Him.

Secondly, man was created to be useful. God was to give him dominion over everything else He had made. Man was to have a satisfying role in charge of God's creation.

When man was put to the test, however, he failed. There was nothing wrong in his make-up. God made everything "very good". Man was well designed and fitted for his work. Yet he was not willing to co-operate with God.

The test was a very simple one. God gave man abilities that no other created thing had. He gave him the power to reason. He gave him the ability to love and He gave him the freedom to choose. God wished the man to be like Him, but He wished the man to do this out of love.

God would feel honoured if man chose to copy Him. There would be no satisfaction in man's obedience if he had no choice. He would become a mere puppet with God pulling the strings. A simple commandment was given and the man was put on trial.

Man considered other suggestions. He reasoned. He did not consult God. He made his choice. He did not love God sufficiently to obey Him completely. Man disobeyed. God did not allow Himself to force the man to love Him. Today we cannot force people to love us if they do not. And man did not. He pleased himself rather than God.

The result of this was that man was no longer God-like. He had been made in the image of God, but he had spoilt that image. It had been marred by sin, shame and guilt. Sin had made man different from God. It had driven them apart. In addition man was now deprived of his true function. He lost his dominion over creation. He rules it now only with difficulty. He rules it with weapons and force.

That is the point at which most of us would have given up. We would have destroyed what we had made. God is different. He is full of love. He began at once to seek to save men rather than destroy them. It was right that man should be punished. God condemned him to death as He had warned man He would. He also gave him first the opportunity to be sorry and make amends.

God's Plan For Salvation

God's plan to save man involved Jesus Christ. He was in the image of God being born the Son of God. He was also God-like in his way of life. In this way he regained the privileges and responsibilities that man had lost. He is over all creation. We may ultimately share the dominion that God intended man to have, through Jesus Christ.

Now when Jayne stopped in her tracks that evening, it was because all this was new to her. She had been talking about her job which she did not find very satisfying. She was anxious to fulfil herself in terms of her ability. Yet she was missing what life is really all about.

Real "job satisfaction" can only be felt when we understand why we were made. It is no use using a garden spade to cut bread or a spoon to dig a field. The bath isn't going to get me into town and the bus won't make my lunch. We shall only find true happiness when we are doing what God created us for.

The purpose of life does not lie in private ambition or selfish gain. It lies in being Godly.

CHAPTER 31

IT was one of those cold but sunny winter afternoons. A number of people were out walking along the sea front, blowing away the cobwebs. They were all muffled up in coats and scarves. Children and dogs ran around to keep warm.

The sea was rough. Huge white horses crashed on top of each other racing towards the promenade. Then the seething foam sucked at the sand and pebbles as if to swallow the whole beach only to be drowned by the next mighty wave.

Suddenly there was a general commotion; screams and shouting, people running, and all attention was riveted on one spot. Three lads had been playing at dodging the waves, standing near the water and running up the beach as each wave came in. Now one of them was several yards out being mercilessly tossed and pounded by those huge breakers.

No-one seemed to know quite what had happened. Had he fallen? Had one of them pushed him? Had he got too close and been dragged by the sheer force of the tide? One or two tried to wade in, but it was impossible to reach the boy. Each wave seemed to take him further away.

Some had run out on a breakwater, but they too tried in vain to help. If the lad was still conscious, he could not hear or respond to their yelling. I was in my teens at the time and remember still my amazement at the strength of that swirling, surging water. The ease with which it had ripped the clothes from the young boy's back had to be seen to be believed.

Eventually the lad was dragged clear. At almost the same time a helicopter arrived from a nearby R.A.F. station and the lad was airlifted to hospital. Sadly we learned a day or two later that he had not survived the ordeal.

It was a tragic end to a pleasant afternoon and a sober lesson. I had often dived with the waves in that way myself. My sister and I often played at daring the waves to reach our feet as we scrambled backwards out of their way. I don't think we ever played when it was quite as rough as it was that day. I don't remember ever falling in. But I know we did get splashed and even soaked once or twice.

Do I hear you say, "It's only childlike"?

The problem is that most grown-ups play the same game! Not at the seaside, I don't mean, but with life. They dice with temptation. They court disaster. They go looking for trouble. They play with fire. The fatality rate is very high.

Playing With Fire

Sometimes we can see it coming. We watch someone make a dead set at another who may be married. We know what the result will be. Yet those involved do not appear to sense the danger. The man who repeatedly takes risks in his business; we can see what will happen. Yet we cannot convince those closest to the situation that anything is wrong.

The Bible has a proverb:-

"Can a man take fire to his bosom, and his clothes not be burned?"

(Proverbs 6:27)

The New Testament uses a graphic phrase that always reminds me of that tragic afternoon by the sea. It speaks of those whose clothes are "spotted by the flesh" and of "pulling them out of the fire" as we had vainly tried to tug that young lad from the grip of the ocean.

There are a thousand ways in which we all place ourselves in the way of temptation. They may be less important than those listed above. They may be less obvious. For those serious about finding true happiness, however, we spend a lot of time doing the wrong things.

The whole aim of the game is to get as close as you can to the waves without letting them get to you. In life that is not the right approach. We ask the wrong questions. We go to the wrong places. We try to see how far we can go without actually getting into trouble.

So the boy in school tries to see how far he can push the teacher but still get away with it. The courting couple want to see how far they can go without doing something they might be ashamed of. The person at work wants to see how much they can get away with not doing and still keep the boss sweet.

That is human nature. It is something we all share. Yet the end can be as tragic. We are running a risk in a matter of life and death. We are wasting precious time seeing how far we can go with God. If we appear to get away with it, we push a little harder or go a little further.

It may sound boring to walk along the promenade and not play games, but it is safe. It is also surprisingly pleasant. The child will not believe it. The grown-up knows there is as much pleasure to be found in the walk and the view.

It is the child who is still asking: "How near to the danger can I go?" The question really ought to be: "How far away can I get?" "How much closer to God can I draw?" "What steps can I take to put His wisdom into practice in my life?" If it sounds boring, it is because we have not grown up. Walking to please God can be pleasant and more rewarding than our pointless games.

CHAPTER 32

JACK and Phyllis were very kind. They liked to have a bit of company in the evenings. In return they were happy to provide a bit of supper about 10 o'clock. Invariably they watched the television news about then.

Jack often talked about the news. He found it difficult to accept some of the things he heard. "It's not like when I was a lad," he would say. Then he would launch into reminiscences of his youth and how times had changed.

"Where will it all end?" he would ask. "I don't know what the world is coming to." "It makes you fear for the next generation." On such occasions we would often get to talking about the Bible. I would explain how such terrible times had been foretold. They would ask me about my faith and why I thought we were living in the last days.

There was one particular occasion when I think they were a little offended. We were sipping our cocoa as usual. The news had included some tragedy involving the deaths of innocent people. "Why did it happen?" Jack had wanted to know. "Why did people like that have to die?"

I began to show that it was because of sin. "Death is the wages of sin," the Bible says. We serve Master Sin too well and we all of us earn death. Even apparently innocent people are no different. We all collect our wages at some time. We are all sinners.

All Sinners?

It was at this point that Phyllis sat up stiffly in her chair. She looked quite hurt and said in a very affronted voice: "Do you mean to say you think we're sinners too?"

I suppose there are plenty others like that. To them sin means the big things. It is the crimes that hit the headlines of our daily newspapers. Somehow we feel that those who try to live decent and honest lives can't be sinners. Like Jack and Phyllis we may be offended at the suggestion that we come into that category.

But we do. The Bible makes it very plain that we do. In God's book, sin is disobedience of His commands. It is not only concerned with the large things that we think of as sins. It is anything that goes against God's ways. That includes us all.

This is most important. Christianity is about a saviour. That means recognising that we need saving. Jesus himself said that he came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. In other words, he did not come to those who felt they were good. They would not see any need for him in their lives. He came for those who accepted that they needed help and wanted to change.

This is the great difference between Christianity and other religions. People often ask me how I can be sure that Christianity is right. How do I know that the Muslim faith is not right? How can I be sure that the Koran is not as good a guide as the Bible?

The answer is that only Christianity offers a saviour. Other religions see the need to be good. They provide great inspiration to their followers to lead a better life. They encourage to greater spiritual

heights. They have sometimes been led by very good men. They have teachers and prophets to aid this endeavour. But they all begin with the assumption that man is basically good. They believe that, with effort, in time he can achieve great things, perhaps even perfection.

The Need For a Saviour

Christianity is unique. Its starting point is quite different. It is alone in teaching that man is basically wicked. There is no way in which, by himself, man can effect his own salvation. He can never reach perfection or eternity on his own. He needs more than just prophets and teachers. He needs a saviour to rescue him from himself and his sins.

This is hard to accept, but it is the teaching of the Bible. God demands humility. We have to face the grim facts about ourselves before He can help us. We have to admit the unpleasant truth about our personal wickedness before we can be saved from it.

Talking to a friend recently I asked him if he had ever found this difficult to accept. He admitted that he had. It had been a long time before he had really thought of himself as a sinner. Like others he mistook respectability for righteousness. For an ordinary honest bloke like himself he couldn't see the need.

What convinced him?

"Three thousand people;" he said. "I don't know the name of one of them;" he added, "but 3,000 people is a lot and I could see that they were right."

By way of explanation, he opened his Bible at Acts chapter 2. Peter the disciple is talking to a crowd on the day of Pentecost. He says clearly and boldly that they were responsible for the death of Jesus. These men came from all over. Many of them may not have been in Jerusalem when Jesus was crucified. They did not feel personally responsible for his death. Yet Peter shows that they share the guilt:

"Him, (Jesus) being delivered by the carefully planned intention and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death;"

(Acts 2:23)

Our sins, yours and mine, are as much a contributory factor in his death. It was the Jews who killed him. Yet we cannot pretend that the situation would have been any different if we had been there.

It was this conviction that made so many accept what Peter said:-

"Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Men and brethren, what shall we do?' Then Peter said to them, 'Repent, and let every one of you be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins: and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call.'"

(Acts 2:37-39)

Three thousand of those who heard were baptised. Three thousand could see the truth of what Peter had said. They confessed that they were sinners - even if only in little things - and needed a saviour. Peter said many other things and encouraged them: "Be saved from this perverse generation:"

The message is for us too - to "all who are afar off". We also are invited to confess our need of a saviour. Don't be fooled into thinking that a good home, nice clothes, kind friends, a decent life put us right with God. They do not. He has provided the saviour we need. He requires that we leave behind what we have made of ourselves and become what He alone can make of us.

CHAPTER 33

PEEPING at me from behind the armchair was Emma's cheeky smile. This was her favourite game.

"You can't see me," she would call. Then she would pop up from behind a piece of furniture and shout "boo". My job was to feign surprise. It was all part of her fun. Then it was round the end of the piano that she hid. I had been jumped out at several times from there. My pretend heart failures had caused fits of giggles.

But Emma was running out of hiding places. She sidled up to my armchair and stood by my knee. Carefully she turned her back on me and put her hands over her eyes. "You can't see me," she called!

In childlike simplicity Emma had assumed that if she couldn't see me, I couldn't see her. There are a lot of people who think like that. They imagine that if they hide from a problem in some way, the problem will disappear. Turning a blind eye to difficulties does not make them go away.

If I had begun this chapter by talking about death, many people would have turned the page. Others would have switched off mentally. Death is an unpalatable subject. It is a topic about which people do not like to talk. When it has to be mentioned they prefer to use other words. They use terms like "passed away" to soften the blow or hide the facts.

The true Christian has to be a realist. We need to face the truth about a situation before we can remedy it. If we have not understood the problem, our answers to it will be pointless.

The Truth - However Unpleasant

The Bible tells us the truth. It does not lull us into a false sense of security. It makes clear when our plight is desperate. It makes plain the need for urgent action. Here are some words of the apostle Paul. They show what many would regard as the "brutal truth":-

"Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned.."

(Romans 5:12)

Immediately people look for a way out of this. Surely it cannot mean what it says? Or, perhaps death is not the end?

So the ugly truth is replaced by something more comforting. Death is the gateway to a better life. It opens up a new and brighter existence. The corpse is only part of the story, the soul or the spirit lives on. These are but myths invented in a bid to escape unpleasant facts.

They do not help, however. They are a way of covering the eyes and pretending that the problem has gone. This may provide short term comfort to the bereaved. It does nothing to solve the real problem. Indeed, it leads men to trust in a falsehood. By fooling ourselves about death, we deny ourselves the truth of how it can be conquered.

The "one man" of the Bible verse above was Adam. It was his disobedience that resulted in death. The matter had been made plain enough to him. Disobeying God meant "you shall surely die". It was the serpent who invented the falsehood still so popular today: "You will not surely die."

Sin Brings Death

Adam's sin led to his death. The death sentence was God's judgment of him. Is it likely then, since it was a punishment, that death was the start of something better? The word of God is:

"In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread Till you return to the ground, For out of it were you taken; For dust you are, And to dust you shall return."

(Genesis 3:19)

The account of how man was "taken out" of the ground is in Genesis chapter two. There is no "get out" clause here either. These are the words:

“And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.”

(Genesis 2:7)

When Adam had breathed his last he ceased to be a living being. He became a dead being. There is no suggestion that any part of him escaped God's sentence. Nothing is said about anything living on.

The breath that God gave Adam is life. It is the life we all share. Animals share it too. They have no immortal soul. Neither do we:

“For what happens to the sons of men also happens to beasts; one thing befalls them: as one dies, so dies the other. Surely, they all have one breath; man has no advantage over beasts, for all is vanity. All go to one place: all are from the dust, and all return to dust.”

(Ecclesiastes 3:19-20)

This is a sad picture. It may seem “hard” when we have to leave loved ones at the graveside. But it is true. As Paul said, all have sinned and all die. There are no exceptions.

An Inevitable End

Yet we persist in living as though there are. In my present job I see at first hand how many people want to go on living. They want to be remembered. Councillors and politicians like to have things named after them. It may be a street or a building. Some will dedicate money for a park bench to their memorial.

This is not a modern phenomenon. Human nature has always been the same. This is what the Psalmist saw in his day:

“Their inner thought is that their houses will continue for ever, And their dwelling-places to all generations; They call their lands after their own names. Nevertheless man, though in honour, does not remain; He is like the beasts that perish.”

(Psalm 49:11-12)

Life is short and precious. Men will go to great lengths to save it. Yet so few enjoy it. Covering their eyes to the situation they act as though life is for ever. Tomorrow will be like today, and better, they say.

I expect you have witnessed, as I have, the man who works all hours for his retirement. He goes flat out for something in the future, but dies before reaching it. I am not thinking of some who struggle to make ends meet. There are plenty who will take on extra work or responsibility to make life more comfortable. They want a little more set aside for a “rainy day”. Sadly, they never get to enjoy it.

They are unaware of James' warning:

“...whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour that appears for a little time and then vanishes away.”

(James 4:14)

It vanishes. It doesn't start again somewhere else. If the soul enjoys bliss in heaven, as some think, it will be pointless Jesus coming back to earth. Yet the Bible teaches that he most certainly will.

Supposing, then, that we face the truth squarely. What then?

Life After Death?

Job was a realist. He too had stood by the graveside and mourned. He also knew what the future held. He had no vague hopes of heaven, but a firm faith.

He expressed it like this:

“For I know that my Redeemer lives, And he shall stand at last on the earth: And after my skin is destroyed, this I know, That in my flesh I shall see God,”

(Job 19:25-26)

God spoke to Daniel of resurrection:

“And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, Some to everlasting life, Some to shame and everlasting contempt.”

(Daniel 12:2)

Paul makes the matter quite clear:

“For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.”

(1 Thessalonians 4:16)

There is nothing fanciful about this idea. Resurrection is not about spirits, or floating around on clouds. It is resurrection to a real person and real life.

It involves, as it did for Jesus, a tangible body. He was alive. He could be touched. He discussed with his disciples. He ate with them. But the body was different. Instead of blood being the life of that body, it lived by the spirit of God. It was no longer susceptible to pain or disease. It was immortal. Jesus lives still.

Such a resurrection is promised to those who please God. Willingness to share Christ's death can enable us to share his resurrection. We can be like him.

It is no problem to God, who made men and women, to recreate them. It is of no consequence how we meet our death. So, as Paul said to one of the rulers of his day: “Why should it be thought incredible by you that God raises the dead?”

This chapter has used a lot of Bible verses. It has used only a few of the many which could have been used on this subject. There is such an overwhelming weight of Bible evidence for life after death by resurrection. Why is it men prefer to believe a lie? Why do they close their eyes to the reality of death and lose this glorious God-given hope? Why go on pretending?

CHAPTER 34

WE sat, staring out of the little windows, unable to see a thing. It was not my first flight, but neither was I a seasoned traveller by plane. It was the first time I had encountered fog like this.

Stomach and ears told us that we were descending rapidly. The landing gear was ready for touchdown. Everyone strained to get a glimpse of something through the thick grey of our surroundings. Suddenly treetops and roofs appeared, but we were clearly in the wrong place. With a violent lurch the plane began to rise steeply. There were gasps and sighs. Hearts thumped. Then we sat back and waited.

The Captain's voice announced that we would circle for a while and wait. If the fog did not clear we would have to fly on somewhere else. For a long time we flew around, banking, turning, circling.

Almost an hour later the Captain announced that we would try again. I don't think that plane had a large number of religious people on board. However, I know there were several who uttered silent prayers just then.

Isn't it strange how often people will turn to God in a crisis of that kind? People who do not normally pray suddenly feel the need. When, ten minutes later, we were safely on the ground, life resumed its normal face. People began rushing for connections. Some thought of facing the customs men. Others had relatives to meet. How many then thought of prayer it is hard to say.

God - A True Friend

A friend in need is a friend indeed, we say. That is true enough. The best friends are those who will help when the chips are down. Friendship is especially valuable when things are going wrong.

We would not expect to "use" our friends only at such times, however. There has to be give and take. We expect our friends to be friendly all the time. We would not be happy to see them only when they needed help. And we recognise the need to be the same ourselves. It would be selfish and wrong to pretend friendship occasionally to our advantage.

Yet this is how so many of us behave with God. God is a God of love, it is said. So men treat Him rather like an over-indulgent old grandfather. In the minds of many He is there for emergencies and nothing else. This is unreasonable.

It is true that God is a God of love. It is also true that He is a God of justice. He is fair and righteous. It is not true that God will turn a blind eye to every wickedness for ever.

A God of Love and Judgment

It may be that past generations were threatened by "blood and thunder" sermons. They may have been wrongly terrorised by talk of God's judgments. The present generation, however, appears to have had an overdose of permissiveness. It basks in the thought of a God indulgently smiling on its folly and ignorance.

It is time to straighten out our thinking about God. We need to know the God of the Bible. We need to obtain the balanced picture that the Bible portrays.

There are genuine difficulties which people have in knowing God. I have been asked by countless people why God seems different in the Old Testament from the New. Some have written to me troubled by this question. In the Old Testament God appears so strict. He is a God of judgment, angry and severe. In the New Testament He seems more merciful. Jesus is gentle and kind and came to show what God is like. How are we to resolve this puzzle?

God Does Not Change

Let's get one thing clear; God is not changeable. He does not suffer from moods or depression. There is no "shadow of turning"; the Bible says, with Him.

That means that He does not have double standards. It also means that we cannot do things behind His back as it were. We are always in His sight. He is faithful and consistent.

There are examples, of course, of God's kindness and mercy in the Old Testament. The law of Moses, strict as it seems, was founded on very merciful principles. If it had been kept properly, it would have resulted in a clean, caring and just society. Provision was made for everyone down to the very poorest of the people. Even the humane treatment of animals was provided for.

Why then was there this idea of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth? How does this square with the very different teaching of Jesus? Did not Jesus tell us to love our enemies and do good to those who hate us?

Yes, he did. Indeed it was Jesus himself who invited us to make this comparison. He first mentioned this difference between established teaching and his own word.

We need to know first, however, what the "eye for an eye" idea meant. This is not the licence to retaliate that it sounds to be. It was concerned with the operation of justice.

Think back to the last argument you heard. It probably began with something quite trivial. Before long, however, it escalated. Something was said that evoked a retort. That provoked another comment which, in turn, led to a slightly stronger reply. Gradually the two sides forced each other further apart.

Each answer became a little more extreme. Soon people were saying things that were exaggerated and which later might be regretted.

That is always the case. Human nature always has to go one better (or one worse). The tendency is to hit back harder. "He has blacked my eye, I'll black both his:"

It was exactly that which the law was designed to prevent. It was not so much a permission as a restraint. First the wrong had to be established. When that was done, punishment had to be administered. But the punishment must fit the crime. It was not literally the gouging out of eyes, but a just measure of punishment.

Jesus plainly said that he did not come to destroy the law. He did not change it to mean something else. What he did do was to take the principles of the law a step further.

For example, he pointed to the law which said a man must not murder. Jesus looked at what gives rise to murder. He considered the root cause. He said that a man should not be angry with another. If a man controls his anger he will not commit murder.

Jesus drew attention to the commandment not to commit adultery. Again, he saw that the basic failure of man in this sin was his lust. Jesus instructed that a man should control his lust. He taught that the desire and planning of such an act was wicked. It was as bad as the act itself if only the opportunity to carry it out was missing.

So with the law which permitted a punishment equal to the crime. The law restricted the retaliation. It was far better, as Jesus taught, if man could overcome his desire to retaliate altogether. He should love his enemies and do good to those who hated him. Vengeance should be left to God. He will see that true justice is done ultimately.

Old and New

In the past God often judged nations directly. Sometimes He used one nation to punish another. Sometimes He judged individuals in the same way. People often point to the wars of the Old Testament. Yet Jesus commands us not to fight. Has there been a change in God's outlook?

God is unchanging, but the life of Jesus has made a difference to what we may do. Jesus was the first man to live a sinless life. He was the first perfect man. For that reason God has made him judge of mankind. He has committed all judgment to him.

God has appointed a day when Jesus will come to judge the world. If God appears to be less strict today it is perhaps because judgment is awaiting His intervention. Jesus will judge. Justice will be done.

Anyone else would be biased in their judgment. Issues would be clouded by their own weaknesses and sins. Jesus alone is qualified to be a just judge. Jesus condemned our going to war. It is wrong for us to do this. We should not take God's law into our own hands in that way.

Yet Jesus, when he comes again, will war against the nations. He will fight for God. He will fight to rid the world of corruption and injustice. He will establish what is right. He will use force to do it.

The principles on which he will judge are God's. They are the same righteous dealings which God has always operated. They involve the idea of "an eye for an eye". That is, the punishment will fit the crime. It is the New Testament that teaches that "a man reaps what he sows".

CHAPTER 35

A NEAR neighbour was quite beside herself. She sat with her cup of tea and began to pour out her troubles. It seemed that one of her unmarried daughters was expecting a child. Grandma-to-be was horrified. Where had she gone wrong?

"I've done everything for those children," she said. "We've given them a good education. We've done everything we could to help them. We've taught them to be honest and hardworking. We've tried to

show them how to be fair and decent. We've given them good clean values and proper standards. Why should this happen?"

We sat and talked for a while. It became apparent that Madge and George had indeed done their best. They had passed on what they thought were good Christian standards. Unfortunately, modern education had challenged these. Modern values had undermined their work. Adolescence had brought changing attitudes in their children. The values of others had rubbed off on them.

"Why shouldn't I?" they had begun to ask. The only answer mum and dad could offer was: "Because we say so." But they were old-fashioned as far as the children were concerned. Why should they be right any more than the moderns? Because dad said so was really no reason at all. Times had changed. Dad didn't understand.

When Madge had gone home we began to think about our own children. Would we make the same mistakes? What was it that they had done wrong?

The Need For Standards

The sad part was that neither Madge nor George had any time for religion. The Bible was not a book they ever bothered with. Consequently their own standards were the only authority they could offer their children. When these were questioned there was nothing else, no backstop.

Modern thinking teaches children to question old values. Modern education often derides old ideas. It scoffs at ways it regards as out-dated. One generation's opinions are just as good as another's.

The Bible is a valuable authority. When the children ask why this way, the answer should be: "Because God says so." When modern ideas challenge our values we go back to the Bible to see what it says. My ways may be old-fashioned, but God's wisdom is timeless. His values are wise, His standards are right for every generation.

The world has set standards for various things. Once upon a time these were very vague. They depended on the size of a man's hand, or his stride. Today they are very precise. Whether we buy a yard or a metre we know exactly how long it should be. Whether we obtain a pound or a kilogram it should match exactly with our own scales. When we have paid for our goods we are aware of what change there should be.

In every kind of weight and measure, standards have been set. Justice means conforming to those standards.

In behaviour too there are certain standards. The law of a country lays down what is acceptable practice there. However, these laws are concerned with more abstract things. You cannot measure morals in the same way as apples. That is why, in these things, the standards have shifted.

Getting Away With It

For many people the only crime is being found out. They make allowances for themselves. They feel they can justify their own actions. They regard it as perfectly alright to drive at any speed they wish. Only if there is a policeman following do they have regard to the limits.

Stealing time from work is justified on the basis of "He does it, so why shouldn't I?" Petty thieving from employers takes place because "They won't miss it, they've got plenty more." Prices have to be put up to take account of the items which have "fallen off the back of a lorry".

What is true in little things is true in large ones too. The law used to be, "Thou shalt not commit adultery". Today, however, marriage breakdown is common. Many people accept the idea of living together outside of marriage. Those not personally involved feel it is none of their business. If it makes the people concerned happy, then it's alright for them. The standard is only judged by whether or not it might damage the health or happiness of others. The prevailing idea today, therefore, has changed the law. It is "better" to stick to one partner. It may be quite acceptable to commit adultery provided you are careful. This is not God's way.

Even this dramatic lowering of standards is not enough for some. A television programme showed some of the dangers of AIDS. Young people interviewed, however, were not concerned. "You have to die sometime," was their attitude. "You could be run over by a bus:" Their thinking is clear. Whatever

the consequences, they would do as they liked. Not only is the law itself disregarded, the results of ignoring it are also despised. Neither law nor punishment will deter them.

The Bible speaks plainly against all immorality. Sex outside marriage is not right. Homosexuality is also condemned.

“Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God:”

(1 Corinthians 6:9-10)

Our society has reached a stage then when everyone does what they think is right. The standard is no higher than a man's own conscience. In practice this means that there is really no standard at all. Our world is very sick.

This is a frightening state of affairs. No wonder that more and more people are suffering mental and nervous disorders. Pressure, anxiety and depressive ailments mean more drugs and tranquillisers to help us cope.

Two Kinds of Fear

Fear has two meanings. We need the right kind of fear, Godly fear and reverence for God's laws. Then we should have no cause for fear, the wrong fear, or terror, of what the future holds. If we lived our lives God's way, we would not need to be frightened of men.

Some are not afraid, of course. They point to the fact that the world has always been a wicked place. Even in Victorian times people wondered whatever the world was coming to. They felt then, as they feel now, that “things can't get much worse” : Things are not really very different.

It is true that human nature is the same in every age. It is true that there were killer diseases then for which cures have since been found. It is not true that things are no different. There have always been wars. But only in the last few decades has man had the capacity to destroy the whole human race. Three A-bombs were used in 1945. One was a test. The other two killed a minimum of 140,000 people then. Many thousands more have died slowly since. That was only the start.

God will not permit the destruction of the whole world, however. He has said through the prophet:

“For thus says the LORD, Who created the heavens, Who is God, Who formed the earth and made it, Who has established it, Who did not create it in vain, Who formed it to be inhabited; ‘I am the LORD, and there is no other...’ “

(Isaiah 45:18)

God will intervene in the affairs of our world. He will ensure that His purpose cannot be thwarted. Many will doubt this. Peter warns of those who will mock at the idea of God's intervention. They will claim that nothing changes. Everything carries on in the same old way. Peter points to the flood as proof that God has intervened before. He is a God of judgment.

He has said that He will destroy those who destroy the earth. He will not allow things to get out of control. He will fill the earth with His glory.

Poverty and Riches?

Where does that leave you and me? Does it have anything to do with famine at one end of the world and a butter mountain at the other? Will it have any bearing on the violence on our streets? Can it alter harmful political influences that your children might be subject to at school? Will it make any difference to the problems of drugs or inflation?

The answer to that is largely a personal one. Are we the people who think our children should go to Sunday School but have no time for God ourselves? If so, the answer may be “No”. It will make no difference. When God fills the earth with His glory, we shall not be there. The people of whom Peter spoke when God intervened before were like that. They had no time for God.

Jesus says:-

"But as the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and did not know until the flood came and took them all away, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be."

(Matthew 24:37-39)

The tragedy of this situation is "they did not know". All kinds of things were going on around them. The Bible describes the days of Noah in these terms:-

"... that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence."

(Genesis 6:5,11)

The world was a terrible place. It had a face we would have recognised, violent and filthy. Some "innocent" people must have been concerned, but they did not turn to God. They were worried and frightened by what they saw, but they did not ask Noah about his faith. They were not with him in the ark. Despite all this they would not turn to God for an answer.

No Time For God?

The words of Jesus show us why. They were just too busy with the ordinary everyday things of life. God had been crowded out. The things they were doing were not especially wicked. Buying and selling is a way of life. Going out for meals, planning your wedding and the future all seems reasonable. What happened elsewhere was not their concern. They were just too wrapped up in their own affairs. They were not hurting anyone, but neither were they pleasing God.

Until it was too late. They had not wanted to know about how God saw their standards or situation. They did not care until God's judgments fell and they were swept away.

Jesus says it will happen again. The flood will not happen again. But its lesson has not been learned. Despite all the warnings, Jesus says men will again take no notice until it is too late. God's judgments will find them unprepared.

CHAPTER 36

THERE was a letter waiting for me when I reached home. It was from an insurance man. It began by pointing out that we live in dangerous times. With a spate of burglaries and a stabbing in the area, no-one could deny that.

Then it asked some personal questions:-

Would my family be able to manage if I died suddenly? Had I made sufficient provision for my retirement? Had I protected my savings...

Now, insurance is not a matter in which the Bible lays down rules. Too often churches try to go beyond what the Bible says. They make rules for their members about giving money, about smoking, and so on. The Bible lays down principles for us. It is for each person to live by those principles in the best possible way.

The Bible says we should put our trust in God. It says that we should not be anxious about tomorrow. The future is God's concern. How we see insurance in the light of these principles is for each one to determine. The level of an individual's faith will determine his or her response. Our consciences work at different levels. Some feel the need for some insurance. Others feel it right to depend entirely on God. We cannot legislate for one another in these matters.

A Question of Insurance?

But I found myself wondering if the insurance man had asked himself these questions. Did he know what would happen to him if he died suddenly? Had he made sufficient provision for his future by attention to the word of God? Had he perhaps protected his savings but neglected things of greater value?

A few days later the letter was followed up with a call. Eddie was a nice bloke, friendly and genuine. We chatted about the state of the world and then got down to business.

We talked about the blessing of the family sharing my faith. This would make a difference if anything unfortunate should happen to me. Then we discussed how my faith colours my attitude to retirement. I expect Jesus Christ to return before I have the chance to retire. From the signs the Bible gives, his coming looks very near.

Even if it doesn't happen quite so quickly, I would rather put any spare income to use. Better to be helping others than to aim to amass a fortune I may or may not need. If retirement comes, I pray I shall have the health to enjoy using it wisely. Wealth, however, is not synonymous with happiness.

"What about saving up for things?" said Eddie. "Surely you have things you want - a boat, a caravan? Have you thought about the little girl's wedding in a few year's time?" (She was ten!)

The Real Purpose of Life

I smiled. "No," I said, "I can't think of anything like that I really want. I may need a small amount for minor repairs to the house if Jesus hasn't come. Life isn't about boats and caravans and weddings though, is it?"

Eddie had to admit that it wasn't. I showed him the passage in Luke's gospel where it says:-

"...for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses."

(Luke 12:15)

Jesus went on to tell a parable about a rich fool whose schemes came to nothing. He had made the mistake of leaving God out of his plans. "Life is more than food," he taught in the same chapter. "And the body is more than clothing."

He rounded off his advice like this:

"For all these things the nations of the world seek after, and your Father knows that you need these things. But seek the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added to you."

(Luke 12:30-31)

I think Eddie was a little taken aback. Clearly, in his business he was used to meeting people who do want lots of things. In fact, many people are obsessed with "getting". They spend their lives saving up for this or that. Some things are just a craze. The CB, the computer games, the stereo, the video each give way to something else. In big things too it's the same. You have only to consider how many callers there are at the door. Double glazing, patio doors, home insulation and designer kitchens are a fair sample. Then of course there are improved security systems to protect them all!

Where To Get Off?

So it goes on in a never-ending spiral. It's a treadmill which is very difficult to get off. There is an even greater problem, however.

Most people do not want to stop. Materialism has become their god. It is a form of idol worship. Perhaps you think that is an exaggerated statement. Yet a god is only whatever finds pride of place in our lives. It is the thing that comes first in our affections. It is the thing on which we lavish most attention.

For some people it may be a car. Others spend all their time and resources on D.I.Y. Today people are scathing about those who, in ignorance, used to worship stone statues. We would criticise the

foolishness of men who would pray to a carved out tree trunk. Yet the modern idols of jewellery, steel and brick are no different.

Abstract things can be idols too. Education or ambition sometimes find too important a place. Some people are “workaholics”. To them nothing matters quite so much as their work.

The reason that these have become idols is that people think they may bring happiness. Pursuits are tried and discarded. Gadgets and equipment are acquired like toys and forgotten again. Relationships are entered into and overturned again when they fail to provide that elusive quality.

People believe that they have a right to be happy. They do not always feel quite so strongly the need to make others happy. It is an attitude of take rather than give.

The Goal of Happiness

The Bible does not promise us happiness now. It leads us to think outwards from ourselves. It teaches that we should want to make God happy first. We, should put His will before our own.

In this life contentment is a greater prize than happiness. We need to learn to be content with our situation. We have to make the best of circumstances. We must rejoice in what God has given us and try to see His purpose through it. Dissatisfaction and complaint are the signs of selfishness. Thankfulness and trust in Him are what God seeks from us.

This is a hard lesson for a world bent on improving its lot now. Man has exploited the ground, the earth's raw materials, the animals and other men through greed. The result is instability, insecurity and fear.

Sometimes when I sit listening to the news, I think of dear old Gladys. I was in “digs” in the north of England. Gladys Stevens was the landlady. She was a kind lady in many ways, but just a little eccentric. She would perform yoga exercises on the dining room floor. Even the arrival home of her lodgers could not interrupt this routine!

Escaping From Reality

The thing that comes most readily to mind, however, is her attitude to the news. Whenever a news bulletin came over the radio, she would leap up and turn it off. The news frightened her. She could not bear to listen to, or think about, what was going on in the world. I can picture her now almost running across the room to press the button. She was terrified she might hear too much.

Poor Gladys! She was living proof of what Jesus says about “men's hearts failing them from fear and the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth ...”

Others have different ways of hiding from the truth. A colleague at work couldn't bear to be quiet. She carried a transistor around continually. It was a form of escapism. It prevented her having to think about problems and worrying.

There is no need to fear the news or the future. Jesus has told us what lies ahead. He has warned us what to expect. There are dangerous times ahead, but Jesus can help us to weather the storms. It would be wrong to be proud of knowing how things will end. It would be wrong to be presumptuous of God's care. At the same time, Jesus has said that we have no need to worry if we are committed to him:-

“Now when these things begin to happen, look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption draws near.”

(Luke 21:28)

This is easy to say. Some sincerely desire to share this confidence, but do not feel they can. “I wish I had your faith,” they say. “Where do you find this trust in God?”

Faith is something we all have. It is not a magical commodity that some have and others don't. It is not an excuse for things that cannot be explained. Faith means believing.

All of us believe in something. Most of us believe in ourselves. There is no-one can do a job as well as I can! Most of us feel like that at some time or another.

We want to believe in God. We believe that He is able to do what we ask. Then we begin to doubt. What if He doesn't? Our minds begin to think of alternatives. Perhaps then I could do it this way instead.

In our thoughts we are saying: "If God doesn't help me, I'll do it myself" It's a little sort of "safety valve" we allow ourselves, a kind of "get out" clause just in case. This undermines faith and totally destroys it. It places self above God and makes us stronger than He.

When Jesus says "Have faith in God," he is not asking the impossible. He is asking us to look at our lives and find out what things we trust. When we realise where we have put our faith, he asks us to transfer it. "Have faith IN GOD," he says. God is more deserving of our confidence than anything or anyone else.

Faith has then to grow. It may be quite tiny to start with. Jesus said that if faith was like a grain of mustard seed it would be possible to move mountains. Some think that Jesus was talking about the amount of faith. This seems unlikely. Faith is not something to be measured like that. I can't say that my faith is the size of my thumbnail, or that I have a bowlful. Faith is not that kind of thing.

The point about the mustard seed is its growth. It is a tiny seed, but the plant grows and grows and becomes a small tree. Faith must be kept growing. We trust God a little. He is deserving of our confidence. We trust Him a little more. If we keep our faith increasing like that, we shall one day be able to move the mountains in our lives.

It's all a question of putting God first.

CHAPTER 37

ONE of the delights of living in York was to be able to walk around the city walls. It was not a circular tour. Part of the wall is missing. Those parts that remain in-tact, however, were my regular Sunday morning outing for some time.

I was generally alone. In spring the daffodils were a beautiful picture on some of the grassy slopes below. The thing I remember best, however, is the feeling of elevation the walls gave. They were just high enough to make me feel that I was not part of the "rat race" below. I could look down on the traffic and pedestrians who were unaware of being watched. They were like little ants scurrying here and there. Everyone was busy doing something or going somewhere. Soon I would be back down there doing my share of rushing about too!

Perhaps you too have reflected on life in this way. Perhaps you have wondered how God sees us when He looks down at us. How futile our activities must sometimes seem to Him. All that energy and effort expended to achieve... what?

At the end of the day it is how God sees us that really matters. We can fairly easily deceive other people. We can pretend to be something we are not. We can make believe that we are righteous because we look respectable. But we cannot fool God. It is how we appear to Him that is important.

Seeing Things God's Way

The Bible helps us to see things from His point of view. It helps us to see ourselves as He sees us.

Jesus once told a parable about a man who must have found this difficult to do. He was young. He saw things only from his own standpoint. He asked his father if he might have his share of the inheritance early. Unaware of the sadness he caused, he left the family home and went away.

We call this man the prodigal son. It didn't take him very long to get through his fortune and to be in need. Eventually he came to his senses. Back home his father had slaves. They were well treated, for his father was a good man. They had board and lodging provided. Yet he, a member of the family, was worse off than those slaves. He had no food and had taken work minding pigs.

He resolved to swallow his pride and go back. He rehearsed a little speech with which to greet his father. "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants."

The father listened to the son admitting how foolish he had been. He heard him confess his guilt. He never allowed him to ask to be made a servant. The father was glad to have him back as a member of the family. "This my son was dead and is alive again," he said. "He was lost and is found."

I don't think the young man thought he had ever been lost or dead. He had certainly never taken his last breath and been put into a grave. He had not died in that sense. Yet he was "dead" to that family.

None of us has difficulty in understanding what Jesus is saying. He is not using death in the way we normally think of it. Just imagine that we had to draw a conclusion about death from this chapter alone. We would have to say that death is being away from the father's house. Life for the prodigal was coming back home. This is so important that Jesus makes the father in the story repeat the words. He wants to be sure we know the meaning.

Death

In the Bible death is sometimes spoken of in this way. It is being away from God. It is not obeying the message of Jesus. It is putting other things in our lives before God. In these ways we can be "dead" even while we are alive. We may feel alive, but we may not be so to God. Paul says this:

"But God, who is rich in mercy, because of his great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ..."

(Ephesians 2:4,5)

In other words, we are dead in God's eyes for so long as we remain in our sins.

This is a very serious matter, and not one to be treated lightly. It may come as quite a shock to many to realise this, but it is what the Bible teaches. It is easily possible that any of us can be dead in God's sight even while we think ourselves to be alive.

This is an unpleasant thought. Until we can accept it, however, we shall not be able to remedy it. Unless we appreciate the seriousness of our situation, we shall not value God's help.

The Bible shows that we can be rescued from this kind of death. It shows that we can come alive. This involves a sort of paradox. In order to come alive in God's sight, we have to die! Let me explain.

We have all of us lived for ourselves. Even if we are not guilty of dreadful crimes, we are still sinners. We are sinners because we have lived for ourselves and not for God who made us. The Bible says we need to "die" to that way of life. We need to "kill" the selfishness. We need to "mortify" (put to death) our old selves and all our wrong doing.

Another Death

Baptism has already been mentioned in a chapter about the work of Jesus. It is in baptism that God forgives our sins. Baptism is also the "death" that we must die if we want to live for God.

“do you not know that as many of us as were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? ...For the death that he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life that he lives, he lives to God. Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

(Romans 6:3,10-11)

There are people I know who claim to have been baptised, but who have not died in this way. Their baptism was carried out when they were small. They did not renounce an old way of life. They were not capable of willingly taking on a new one. Such are not truly baptised.

It is essential that we come home to God with the attitude of the prodigal son. We must appreciate our true situation before Him. We have to be willing to “eat humble pie”, to admit our foolishness, to repent. We have all squandered the father’s goods. If we have wasted nothing else, we have all wasted a part of our lives. God’s gift of life has been misused, spent on ourselves. We need to see ourselves as we appear to God and repudiate the past.

If, then, we are willing to serve God, He will receive us as children. We can be “alive unto God”. We shall matter to Him. He will count us as part of His family.

CHAPTER 38

THE Norwegians are expert campers. I thought I knew a lot about Norway, as I had lived there for two years. I had never been camping, however. I knew nothing about that. So, whilst I had some knowledge of the people and the language, I had no idea about life in a tent.

I had expected to have to rough it a bit. The bed would be hard. I would need lots of warm clothes. Meals would be a bit primitive. Travelling light would be essential. No doubt I would be glad of home comforts by the end.

Imagine our surprise, then, on the first night, to see the natives setting up a home from home. They were organised beyond compare. There were no picnic hampers and primus stoves coming out of their cars. Instead, out came the portable T.V., electric mixers, hairdryers and small ovens (the microwave wasn’t on the market then). There was everything but the proverbial kitchen sink! Whatever the Norwegians were going to do with their weekend, doing without was not one of them!

All too easily, though, we can think that gadgets make up the home. We fall into the trap of believing that happiness depends on them. We regard them as an essential part of family life, when they are not.

Houses or Homes?

This is one of the reasons for today’s tragic breakdown in marriage and family life. Many have wrong priorities. They are not aware that it was God who instituted marriage. They do not see the need to make Him the foundation of their lives. Yet the Bible says:

“Unless the LORD builds the house, They labour in vain who build it.”

(Psalm 127:1)

The “house” here is not the bricks and mortar, of course. It is the family. If God is not at the foundation and heart of the family, it is destined for failure.

When God created man He did not wish him to be alone. He therefore created woman. She was unique. Man was created from the dust. Woman alone was created from something living, from the man. Man and woman therefore belong together in a unity.

For this reason, God said, a man and woman were to be one and to stick together.

“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.”

(Genesis 2:24)

Jesus said:-

“So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate.”

(Matthew 19:6)

Men and women alone, made in God's image, have the capacity to love. This ability is not possible in the rest of the animal kingdom. It is wrong to break the promises that are made at marriage.

Men living with men and women with women was not part of God's purpose. It is strongly condemned in the scriptures. It is appreciated that some have a tendency towards those of the same sex. Just like a tendency to flare up in anger, or to impatience, such traits have to be controlled.

The Ideal of Marriage

A marriage can only really be successful when both parties see the need to make sacrifices. They must love one another so much that they are prepared to sacrifice their individuality for the marriage. They are each to love the other for their partner's sake, not for their own sake.

Husbands are to exhibit the same concern for their wives as Jesus Christ showed for the church. They must be willing, if necessary, to sacrifice their own lives for the sake of the wife. Jesus gave his life that repentant sinners might live.

Wives are to be submissive to their own husbands. There is no place in the Godly family for the misplaced values of equality. In God's design the man must take the lead with all the responsibilities that places on him. The wife must accept and encourage his leadership.

Eve was created from the side of Adam. Husband and wife are to walk side by side, helping one another. Woman was not made from the head to be the boss, nor from the feet to be oppressed. She is to be loved and respected.

God need not have placed men and women in families. He could have devised some system of communal living. He could have allowed a system in which people chose partners for sex and then moved on. He did not. God ordained marriage to produce a secure and stable background for children. The family unit is God's idea. It can only succeed when we recognise this and make Him the centre of it.

In the Old Testament Israel were brought out from slavery in Egypt and made God's people. The nation was known as the “children” of Israel. As they journeyed to the land God had promised they were carefully marshalled and grouped. They did not march in any order they chose. Their camp was no haphazard pitching of tents anywhere.

God put them in their families and tribes. Their camp was square, grouped around the tabernacle. This was God's tent in the centre of the camp. All their homes faced inwards to the things of God.

The Family Centre

Most things in Israel were done in the home. Education was not delegated to schools. There were no homes for the elderly. Things revolved around the family which took its lead from God.

Our lives today should be God-centred too. Now, as then, each member of the family has a part to play.

Father's responsibilities are based on the example of God. He is the great Provider. Father is responsible for the family. It is his family. It carries his name. He is the decision-maker. He is also responsible for the discipline, as God lovingly disciplines His children.

In God's plan of things, mother is the home-maker. She is not to be chained to the kitchen sink, but she is to “keep” the home. She must monitor the influences that enter and affect her home. They may be friends, literature, films or other things. Mum must ensure that the influences to which her children are subjected are the right ones.

Children continue the family. They bear the name and carry it on. They need to be brought up in the stability of a home where it is plain they are loved. They must learn to respect and honour parents. This is good training for respecting God and giving Him honour. Right principles are vital to their proper growth in the ways of God.

These are ideals seldom accepted today. Yet they are what family life is really all about. It is essential for happiness that the family revolves around the things of God. He has established the pattern. The failures of today are the result of ignoring this pattern.

The result of putting these ideals into practice is relationships that are stable. Families aware that happiness is not about trappings, but about God, are united and strong.

CHAPTER 39

IF you have ever played “donkey”, you will know that it can be a lot of fun. A huge drawing of the animal is pinned up, minus its tail. The tail, a piece of material or rope, has then to be pinned on by the players. The snag is that they are blindfolded first. The tail can finish up in some unlikely places, and especially if the donkey is moved around a little too!

I am always reminded of this game when people talk about suffering. “I cannot possibly believe in a God who allows such dreadful suffering;” I hear people say. “How can there be a God if He lets such things go on?” “If there is a God, why doesn’t He do something about it?”

These are understandable questions, but they are a bit like the tail of the donkey. They cannot be properly understood until the whole picture is in place.

Once we appreciate more of God’s purpose and love, it becomes easier to understand the place of suffering. And it becomes easier to accept what we cannot understand or explain.

The Reason For Suffering

True love does not mean giving in to every whim. Love cares. It is concerned with what is best for the one loved. If we really love someone we sometimes have to tell them things, for their own good, that may be painful. We have to “be cruel to be kind”, we say. Flattery is a deceitful thing as is plain from this proverb:-

“Faithful are the wounds of a friend, But the kisses of an enemy are deceitful.”

(Proverbs 27:6)

God disciplined Israel in that way. He allowed them to suffer famine circumstances. Then He provided food for them. The Bible tells us why Israel had to suffer in this way.

“...the LORD your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. So he humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna...”

(Deuteronomy 8:2-3)

The love of God sometimes involves suffering and sadness therefore. Look at these seemingly strange words about Jesus from which it is clear that God’s love is different from the way we think:-

"Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So, when he heard that he was sick, he stayed two more days in the place where he was."

(John 11:5-6)

Jesus did not rush to be at Lazarus's bedside. Instead he deliberately stayed where he was and allowed Lazarus to die. It did not mean that Jesus loved Lazarus any less because of this. It means that this is a love we do not always readily comprehend.

From this we must conclude that suffering and grief often have a purpose. In the lives of those who love God they may often have a part to play. God's love is more concerned with our eternal well-being. He may use things which we regard as dreadful and tragic as part of our training. By these, He may test, and shape, and prepare for eternal life, those He loves.

There is much suffering, however, which is not of God at all. Indeed, by far the greatest suffering is brought about by man. It was because Adam sinned that corruption first came into the world. It was man's sin that caused the advent of disease and death. It is because we too are sinners that we are subject to such things.

From God or Man?

Man's inhumanity to man is easily the major cause of suffering. Famines and disasters are often the result of his greed and folly. It is his hatred and avarice which lie at the root of all wars. The huge arsenals of weapons testify to our foolishness. We may say we desire peace, but the evidence in every nation is all the other way.

Even though there may occasionally be a truce in the stockpiling of weapons, it is only temporary. All the peace agreements in the world are doomed to failure ultimately. True peace can only be based on righteousness, and man is not righteous.

"The work of righteousness will be peace, And the effect of righteousness, quietness and assurance for ever."

(Isaiah 32:17)

Why doesn't God do something about it?

He has! God has intervened by sending Jesus. God will put a stop to this headlong rush to destruction in which man is involved. It is the righteous life of Jesus Christ which has ensured that eventually our world will have peace. Jesus is coming back to disarm forcibly the nations and create the peace we need.

"For out of Zion shall go forth the law, And the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, And shall rebuke many people; They shall beat their swords into ploughshares, And their spears into pruning-hooks; Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, Neither shall they learn war any more."

(Isaiah 2:3-4)

It is no use then to use suffering to pretend that there is no God. We cannot have it both ways. We cannot question God's existence and at the same time blame Him for the state of our world. Suffering is largely man's responsibility. It may sometimes be used by God to discipline or train His people.

The Need For Repentance

This does not provide the complete answer to every cause of sadness. Sometimes there are apparently "innocent" victims for which no explanation is immediately available. Nor must we suppose that suffering is in any way a direct punishment for sin. Severity of suffering in no way reflects degrees of sin as Jesus himself said:

“Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think they were worse sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish.”

(Luke 13:4-5)

It is our repentance that is paramount here. One way or another we are all doomed without trust in God's ability to deliver. Those who pour scorn on a God they cannot understand or accept, have no solution to suffering themselves.

Our need is to come in humility to the One who can save. We shall then find that suffering is the tail end of a complex story. If we can accept the love of God we shall wait in faith for the coming of the Lord. Then we may understand the whole of His purpose.

CHAPTER 40

ONE of the household jobs I still find most difficult is cutting bread. Most of the other jobs around the house I can manage. This one frustrates me. It is easy with a slicer, but that's cheating! With a bread knife I usually finish up with a “doorstep”! If it's not as thick as that, it is so wafer thin that it collapses into holes!

Some people have a similar problem with the “bread of life” : Their diet in God's word is badly proportioned. A few struggle with large indigestible pieces. A larger number are half starving. It is important with our attitude to the Bible that we obtain the right balance.

There are those who feel that the Bible is not really necessary. They claim that it is possible to be a Christian without reading it. Similarly, people who rarely attend a church still regard themselves as Christians. They believe it is the life they live that matters most.

Mary was like that. She never avoided bus fares. She was honest about things she found or change she was given in shops. She was always ready to do anyone a good turn. She liked a bit of fun, but never at the expense of others. Mary did voluntary work with sick animals and belonged to a peace movement.

Mary believed in God, she said, and called herself a Christian. She could not find time to read about Christ in her Bible, however. She went to church occasionally when she was not too tired or busy.

A Good Life - Not Enough

Now, it is not disputed that the life a person leads is important. There are indeed many good-living people outside church congregations. Sadly, there are some church attenders who lead hypocritical and wicked lives. But all of this does not make belief unimportant.

A car needs both its steering mechanism and its braking system. Questions about which is the most important would be futile. Clearly the removal of either would result in disaster.

Similarly, true Bible teaching and a life based on right principles are both essential if we wish to please God. To pretend that one is more important than the other is just not possible.

A Christian is one who follows Christ. This means accepting the principles he taught. It also means trying to follow the pattern of his life. In the life of Jesus these two things were strongly related. It was his convictions that gave rise to the life he lived. Neither would have made any sense without the other.

Loving God

Jesus taught that the first and greatest commandment was love of God. This is why, even though Mary's life was good, it was not good enough. She had not put God first. She did not feel that worshipping God was important. Instead she put humanity first. She got things the wrong way round. Jesus says that loving men and women is the second commandment.

“You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

(Matthew 22:37-40)

There are many people like Mary who practise a social gospel. They do what they feel is important, but do not look at things from God’s point of view. They do not always consider whether their actions will please God or give glory to Him.

The Right Way To Worship

The same is true of worship. Many worship God in a way that gives them satisfaction. It makes them feel happy and good. It is assumed that it will please God too. Worship is not like a birthday present, however. We may not present just anything to God and expect that He will be grateful. God is a great King.

Men sometimes feel that sincerity is everything. Yet, with God, sincerity alone may not be enough. It is important to be sincere, but it is possible to be sincerely wrong. We can only worship God acceptably on His terms, in spirit and in truth.

Here then are just a few examples of the things that Jesus believed and that the Bible teaches. They are what the Bible calls doctrine, or teaching, but they all have implications for our lives. They are teachings which must percolate through into our attitudes and behaviour. They are beliefs that must be lived in everyday circumstances.

1. There is one God. This is not just a matter for acceptance. Our Lord made it practical when he said:-

“Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one. And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.”

(Mark 12:29-30)

Belief in one God means worshipping only Him. It means having nothing in our lives that comes before Him. There must be nothing that finds pride of place in our hearts or affections above God.

2. Men and women are sinners and therefore die. This simple, Bible teaching is emphasised many times. It has practical implications. If we accept its truth we shall appreciate the brevity of life. We shall want to use our time wisely. We shall want to make the best of our lives for God.
3. Jesus can save us if we believe and are baptised into him. Believing this will mean that we shall want to be committed to him. It will mean that we shall need to understand more of Bible truths before we can believe them. It will also mean that baptism is not an “optional extra”, but the necessary start for a new life. We shall want to be born again and live a completely different life for Christ.

These are examples of the way in which, for the true follower of Christ, principles are linked to practice. These are the things that comprise a careful and humble approach to God’s word. They go to make up a balanced diet and a life pleasing to God.

It does matter what we believe. If we hold wrong ideas the pattern of our lives will be wrong too. If we are mistaken in our understanding of what God requires, our lives will not please Him. It is vital that we discover for ourselves the demands that God makes on us.

In this the Bible must be our guide. It is this that can correct our thinking. It is this that can bring balance to our lives. It is this that will give us right priorities and help us please God.

“... you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for

doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work."

(2 Timothy 3:15-17)

CHAPTER 41

ONE day I intend to make a list of all the things that are blamed on religion! At the top I shall put "brown bread"!

It may seem strange, but people believe it. Anything the slightest bit out of the ordinary is assumed to be because of one's beliefs. So, when the discussion turns to health foods, I confess to eating wholemeal bread. Someone is sure to say: "Oh, is that part of your religion?"

This illustrates how unusual it is to meet someone with a faith. It is apparently so rare that such folk are regarded as "cranky". People immediately begin to look for other odd traits as well.

Another thing that happens is that they judge religion by what happens to you. A friend of ours lost her husband. At around the same time her son had domestic problems. Neighbours were quick to point out that her religion didn't seem to be doing much for her! They seemed to expect that in return for belief, life should be a bed of roses.

Blame Religion

It doesn't work like that. If it did, there would be a great many more believers - for the wrong reasons.

People blame religion for family strife and war. It is true that there have been some extreme groups whose conduct has deserved criticism. Teaching that sets out to divide families and to break up marriages has no foundation in Scripture. The Bible shows that a believer's first obligation is to God. It also shows, however, that he or she should try very hard to live at peace with everyone. The priorities must be right, but example preaches far better than words. The love of God in practice is a disciple's duty towards the family.

Wars also are blamed on religion. The situation in the Middle East or in Northern Ireland it is often said is religious feuding. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Bible condemns going to war. It teaches that we should suffer wrong. It demands that the disciple be a law-abiding citizen. It advocates prayer for rulers and governments.

Gun Fire

Sometimes choices have to be made. At such times God must come first. There is no question, however, of living by the sword or the bomb. The true Christian practises meekness. He anticipates a time when Jesus will come back to the earth in person. He will rule the nations with a rod of iron. He will compel their obedience. No government will be able to stand in his way.

Eventually war will be abolished. The Bible speaks of a time when things will change. Men shall make their military equipment into agricultural implements. The government of Jesus Christ will bring real and lasting peace.

Now, you may be thinking that you have heard all this before. I would not blame you for that. We have become very sceptical over the years. So many promises have produced so little. We feel that we are not prepared to fall for it again. But wait ...

Those promises were men's promises. They were the dreams and schemes of politicians. They were the Utopia that was forgotten once its promise had brought them to power. The ideal world was always just round the corner. Something always prevented us quite taking hold of it.

So it always is. Men do not have the power to bring about all their schemes. They do not possess endless time in which to realise their ideals. They are men. The Bible says:-

"Do not put your trust in princes, Nor in a son of man, in whom there is no help. His spirit departs, he returns to his earth; In that very day his plans perish."

(Psalm 146:3-4)

God IS different. God is not making electioneering promises. God's purpose will come to fruition without the help of man. He has the power to put His proposals into practice. David said:-

"Blessed be the LORD God, the God of Israel, Who only does wondrous things!"

(Psalm 72:18)

Men may intend. God does.

Here are some more verses from that same psalm. They speak of a glorious future under Jesus. They promise a lasting peace based on justice and right.

His kingdom will not be shortlived. It will last:

"They shall fear you As long as the sun and moon endure, Throughout all generations ... His name shall endure for ever;"

(verses 5,17)

It is to be a worldwide kingdom:

"He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, And from the River to the ends of the earth."

(verse 8)

None will be able to withstand his power:

"And his enemies will lick the dust ... Yes, all kings shall fall down before him: All nations shall serve him."

(verses 9,11)

The man in the street will be cared for. All forms of exploitation will disappear:

"He will bring justice to the poor of the people; ... And will break in pieces the oppressor ... He will spare the poor and needy ... He will redeem their life from oppression and violence; And precious shall be their blood in his sight."

(verses 4,13,14)

True worship will be instituted:

"Prayer also will be made for him continually, And daily shall he be praised."

(verse 15)

Prosperity will replace shortages and famine:

"There will be an abundance of grain in the earth, On the top of the mountains;"

(verse 16)

These verses are not a "pie in the sky" idea. They are a prophecy, certain of fulfilment by Almighty God. They are not vague ideas, but a reality in His plan. They are about the kingdom of God which is to be established at the second coming of Jesus. They concern the earth we live in today, but springcleaned and beautified by Christ. That is why we pray "thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven".

God's True Kingdom

These verses do not refer to a kingdom in our hearts. They are not about the work of the church. Some feel that eventually the world will be put right by prayer. They believe that co-operation and goodwill can solve everything. Church unity is one step towards this.

This can hardly be correct.

Reason is against it. It is not possible to put one good apple into a box of bad ones and turn the bad to good. Every time, the good apple is turned rotten by the others.

History is against it. For centuries man has been unable to alter things even when he has tried his best. The human race is rotten. Shock after the first world war led to the belief that it could not happen again. After World War II, men said it must never happen again. Today there is widespread fear of World War III.

The Bible is against it. It shows that the world will have reached an unprecedented state of wickedness. It shows that God's intervention will be necessary. Jesus Christ will come at a time when he is desperately needed.

In a vivid parable, Jesus himself warned of the need to be ready. He spoke of his coming repeatedly. The words are in verse 36-51 of Matthew 24. He said:-

"But know this, that if the master of the house had known at what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not have allowed his house to be broken into."

The coming of Jesus is to be as real as that. It is as if someone should tell you that a burglar were to visit you tonight. Obviously you wouldn't sleep. Perhaps you picture yourself staying up all night, fully dressed. Perhaps you would sit with the telephone on your lap. Maybe you think you would stand by the door with something big and heavy! But you know what Jesus' story means. You would be ready.

Real Hope For The World

We need to prepare for the return of Jesus to the earth. He is coming back in person.

Impossible? Too good to be true? Are you, like me, sick and tired of hearing of good news that never materialises? But can you afford to dismiss it?

This is not like a lucky prize draw. It's not something where you post off personally allotted numbers and wait. It's not something that depends on the odds, which are always stacked against it. This demands faith and commitment, yet it cannot be earned. It is the result of God's mercy, a mercy so great that even His son has been sacrificed. It is absolutely certain of being achieved.

Some shrug this off. Eternal life sounds boring anyway, they say. Who wants to live for ever? That is because their concept of God's offer is all wrong.

Eternal life means eternal happiness. It doesn't mean sitting around or stringing a harp all day long. There will be work to do, work which will be pleasant and rewarding. It will not be work to make us weary, for we shall enjoy eternal youth and eternal strength. It will be work to give satisfaction.

Others feel this sounds alright, but are suspicious. This is an understandable reaction. Here is a true story from many years back which may help.

A particular city was under siege. Enemy troops had it surrounded. They had taken up their positions some way off. They had been there for some time. Although the city had good defences, it was now facing starvation.

There was a man of God in the city who prophesied that God would put an end to their famine conditions. His words seemed impossible of coming true. He spoke of such prosperity that it was just unbelievable. One man openly poured scorn on what he said.

There were also some lepers forced to live outside the city because of their affliction. They felt that their plight was especially difficult. Outside the city they were dying because of the famine. Ultimately they were dying of their leprosy. They decided to surrender to the enemy. If they were pitied they

would be given a meal. This would at least relieve their present misery. At worst, they would be killed, but ... they were dying anyway.

They made their way to the enemy camp only to find it deserted. Unknown to them the troops had heard sounds they took to be an attack from the rear. They had panicked and fled. The lepers enjoyed a meal, helped themselves to some of the things left behind, and moved to another tent.

Good News

At that point they began to feel sorry for their city, afraid of a siege that no longer existed. They returned and reported their findings to the guard on the gate. The guard reported to the king who didn't believe it!

He concluded that it must be a trick. The enemy knew they were short of food and were trying to draw them out. No doubt they had set an ambush for them. He dismissed the report.

Fortunately, the king had advisers who persuaded him that it was worth investigation. They sent two or three soldiers on horseback to see what the situation was. They reported back as the lepers had found and the city was saved. The word of the man of God came true. The man who mocked what he said, however, was killed in the crush. He fell in the gate as people crowded out to loot the enemy tents and was trampled to death.

Isn't that just typical? Isn't it just how people react today? Can't you just see the king deciding it was all fake? The story is in 2 Kings 7.

People say that about religion. They feel that there must be some catch. No doubt there are unscrupulous people who pretend religious belief. Perhaps there are some who are looking for a big following, or easy money.

The Lord Jesus Christ freely gave his life. There was no catch. God, who does not desire that men should perish, sent him to open up a way of escape from certain death. We should be foolish to dismiss it out of hand. Let's at least have the wisdom of the king's advisers. Let's at least investigate further.

This book comes to you free. Christadelphians make no charge for their literature. They are not out to make money or quick converts. They want you to look into the Bible for yourself. They want you to set aside prejudice and take a look. They ask you to compare everything you read with the Bible. Don't take my word for it, check out what you have read here. Other books should never take the place of the Bible.

There's no catch. Salvation is at stake.

CHAPTER 42

WHEN I think of patience, I think of Maisie and Alf. Alf's mother had come to live with them. She was a nice old lady, but she was very demanding. Maisie looked after her well for many years, but it was not an easy task. Occasionally the problems would get her down.

She told me on one occasion that she often prayed for greater patience. It never seemed to do any good, however. The situation only got worse and worse. The old lady got more and more cantankerous. Maisie was at her wit's end.

Then she began to realise that her prayer was being answered by her circumstances. God does not give us patience on a plate. Christian virtues are not handed out like that. We have to learn patience. Through their worsening circumstances, Alf and Maisie were being taught patience.'

God Teaches Us Like Children

Life sometimes has to be like that. If we truly love our children we shall teach and train them. It is for their sakes. We want them to grow up to be liked. We want them to have nice children. As a wise Father, God treats His children in that way.

There are times when suffering comes into the life of the Christian. It is not a sign that God has ceased to love us. Think of what our Lord Jesus Christ suffered. Such things may be essential for our development. God may see them as a necessary part of our training.

Baptism is a commitment to the will of God. There is no little switch on the human mind that can change its thinking overnight. We shall need to change, to become more like God in our ways. Being different from others around us can be hard work. We shall need to work at it.

Sometimes we shall find ourselves going back to the old routines. That is why Bible reading and prayer are important parts of the new life in Christ. We shall need continually the influence of God's word to remind us of His ways.

Reading and Prayer

It is a good idea to establish a regular pattern for reading and for prayer. Some recent statistics suggested that a surprisingly large number of people pray. I wonder how many of those are prepared to listen to God through the Bible. Unless we are willing to lend an ear to what God has said to us, our prayer may be in vain.

Sin does not block prayer. There may be occasions when we feel unable to pray. There may be times when we feel so bad that we do not imagine that God will hear us. Yet there is always a way back if we are truly sorry.

If, however, we always want to talk, we become like precocious children. Why should God hear us then, if we are not willing to listen to what He has to say through the Bible?

"One who turns away his ear from hearing the law, Even his prayer shall be an abomination."

(Proverbs 28:9)

Some suggestions were made in an earlier chapter on how to get started. This verse shows the necessity of reading frequently. It is hard to stress too much the importance of hearing God's word through the pages of Scripture.

Prayer, too needs thought and care. It is no light thing to come into the presence of the Almighty God. His majesty and holiness are easily overlooked. We live in a world where there are fewer and fewer things receiving our respect. Men are apt to become over-familiar. Familiarity breeds contempt. Attitudes to God and His word become sloppy.

The Lord's Prayer

The Lord's prayer is the supreme pattern. It begins with worship and praise. It puts God in His proper place - first. It reminds us that He is a perfect parent. He is in heaven, far above us in His ways and thoughts.

Then the prayer seeks God's kingdom and His will. It is impossible to pray for this unless we are willing to do His will ourselves. That puts things in perspective.

It is in that context that Jesus then taught us to pray for daily bread. Our wants are to be governed by our desire for God's will in our own lives. Our prayers will become less of a "shopping list". We shall more readily identify with what God wants for us. He knows what is best.

Guidance is then asked as we make our way through the day. Forgiveness too needs to be sought. The prayer concludes by acknowledging God again.

A New Beginning

The two-way communication of reading and prayer is vital. By these we may grow to be more like our Lord. Baptism is only a beginning. The new-born Christian needs to cultivate the fruit of the Christian life. In answer God will bless him and guide his path. God is still at work today. If He controls the nations, He is well able to keep and help us.

Growth requires the right environment. When our son reached his teens he grew very fast. We did not see him growing, but we knew he was shooting up because his trousers always seemed to be at half-mast! Every time we turned round, he had almost grown out of them again!

Growth is like that. You don't see it, but you see the evidence of it. It takes place unnoticed where the conditions are right.

The Bible provides the right background for growth. However, there are many things in the world that might stunt that growth. As well as having the right influences, it is sometimes necessary to remove the wrong ones. Feeding the plants in my garden makes the weeds grow stronger too. They have to be dealt with firmly. They have to be taken out.

The Christian will see the need for separation from the world of Mr. Average. His aims are different. His aspirations are different. There will be pursuits he will judge unsuitable and places he will not wish to go. It is not a burden of having to give things up. It is rather the desire to be more closely related to things that are clean, wholesome and lasting.

The Head of The Church

It was for this reason that Jesus founded the church. The church is not the building, but the people. Jesus saw the need for us to live out his truth with others. He established the church so that people with the same aims may help one another. It is an environment for growing in a Godly way.

He is its head. The members are all part of his family. They are inter-related and inter-dependant. They are to work together in his service. They are far from perfect. They are human. Yet they have much to share in trying to use their lives to honour God.

That is really what this section of our book has been about. We have challenged many prevailing attitudes. Perhaps you have seen yourself in some of them. It is clear that some of them are not Godly, however. Christian really means "Christ's one", belonging to Christ. If we are serious about calling ourselves that, we shall need to stand apart from much in today's world.

We must question whether the world's obsessions with education, ambition and materialism are right. We must ask ourselves where we stand in relation to the morals of today.

We must ask ourselves what part the Bible plays in our lives. Accepting it as the word of God means giving it an important place. It is something precious. It is the right foundation for all faith and action. Sadly this may also mean standing aside from the teachings of other churches.

Decision Time

Life is short. It is a matter of urgency that we make the right use of it. It is vital to try and look at things from God's perspective, to understand life's purpose. It does matter what we believe. It does matter how we live.

We, as all others, are sinners. Without God we die an eternal death. By His mercy we could share a beautified and purified earth in His kingdom. It may sound unbelievably marvellous, but it is God who has promised.

It is a blessing to be able to put our trust in these things. We may commit ourselves through a baptism in which we understand and want to share Christ's sacrifice. We and our families may discover a new dimension to life. We may begin to grow as part of God's worldwide family.

There is just one problem ... yourself. And that enemy apathy who might just let you put this book away and do nothings.

But you are not going to do that, are you?

If you have enjoyed reading this book and would like to pursue your interest in the Bible, you could send for any of the following helps:

- 🔑 A free 12 lesson correspondence course entitled "Foundations of Faith".
- 🔑 6 free issues of the magazine "Glad Tidings".

These, and the Bible Reading Planner mentioned on page 50, can be obtained by writing to:

**Christadelphian A.L.S.,
FREEPOST, Birmingham B30 1BR,
England.**

"Why does the Bible contain so much about the Jews?" "What are those obscure Old Testament books about?" "Why did one so good as Jesus have to be crucified?" "How can a book so old have any relevance today?" "What is the world coming to?" "Where will it all end?"

These and other challenging questions are squarely faced in *The Bible, The Lord Jesus and You*. The author's simple approach and terse style make this paperback both readable and stimulating.

Some common misconceptions are re-examined and modern attitudes tested against the true light of Bible teaching. The conclusions argue persuasively for a life more committed to the ways of God.
