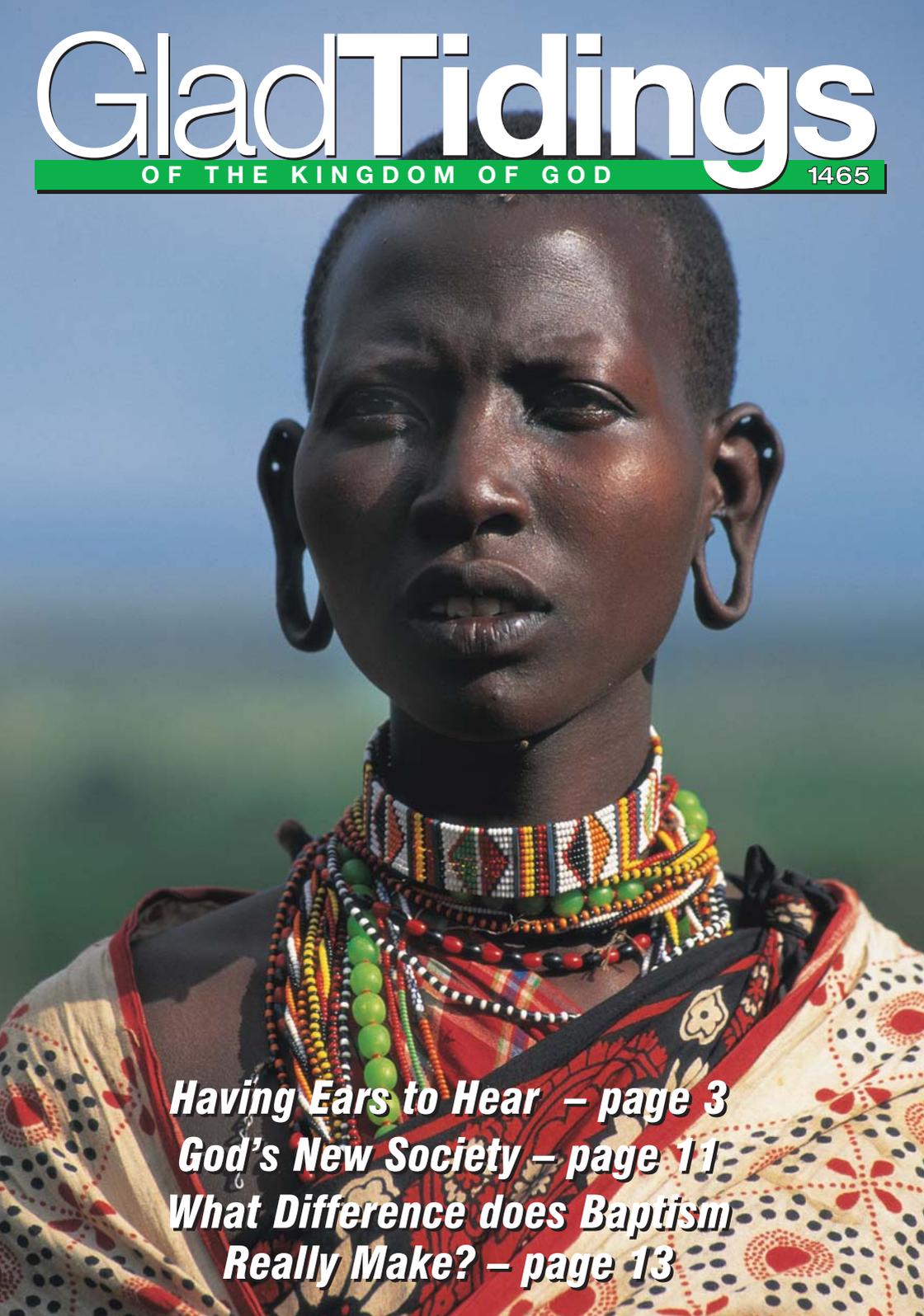


Glad Tidings

OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

1465



Having Ears to Hear – page 3

God's New Society – page 11

***What Difference does Baptism
Really Make? – page 13***

Glad Tidings

OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

122nd Year

F06

1465

A monthly magazine published by the Christadelphians (brothers and sisters in Christ) and available throughout the world. Its objectives are – to encourage study of the Bible as God's inspired message to men; to call attention to the Divine offer of forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ; and to warn men and women that soon Christ will return to Earth as judge and ruler of God's world-wide Kingdom.

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Having Ears to Hear

From early times people have tried to change the way they look, for one reason or another. Sometimes they have been successful, sometimes not.

People have painted their bodies to try to frighten their enemies. Some have tattooed their bodies, so that various patterns or figures became part of their appearance. Often men and women have pierced their ears, and sometimes their noses and tongues as well, so they could insert earrings or jewellery.

The lady on this month's front cover is a member of the Maasai tribe in Kenya and she has extended her ear lobes quite considerably, either to make herself more attractive, or to demonstrate her status in the tribe. Other societies go in for rather different piercing practices, but do you know what a pierced ear meant in Israel, in Bible times? It had a very special significance.

Freedom to Serve

Some people think that the laws God gave Israel limited their freedom because they specified all sorts of things the people could and could not do. In fact the laws were the means of setting God's people free from the bondage of sin and death. If His people wanted to please Him and get the rewards that would follow, these were the principles by which they should live and God would

be with them to bless them. So, it should be no surprise to see that the first detailed provision explained by Moses after he had recorded the Ten Commandments was about freeing slaves. Here is the detail:

"If you buy a Hebrew servant, he shall

serve six years; and in the seventh he shall go out free and pay nothing. If he comes in by himself, he shall go out by himself; if he comes in married, then his wife shall go out with him..." (Exodus 21:2,3).

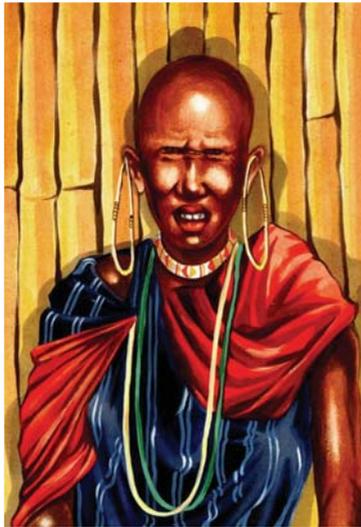
Then the law contains a provision which is full of meaning; it allows for the possibility of a slave wanting to stay forever in his or her master's service. That may appear to us unlikely, but it can happen

if the master and servant have established a close bond and they both want the relationship to continue.

For Love's Sake

Here is the arrangement whereby a slave could remain in the Master's house for life:

"If the servant plainly says, 'I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free,' then his master shall bring him to the judges. He shall also bring him to the door, or to the doorpost, and his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him forever" (21:5,6).



Having the ear pierced was a way of showing everyone that the slave was no longer working in the Master's service because he or she *had to*, but because he *wanted to!* And it also demonstrated to everyone who saw the pierced ear that the Master was loving, kind and considerate – the sort of person you would like to know yourself.

As we might expect, there was a reason why this provision was the very first of the detailed regulations that Moses now explained. The people of Israel were being called to serve God as their Master. He had bought their freedom from Egypt and everything they had came from Him. Now they had two choices. Either, they could obey His commands in a grudging and half-hearted way. Or, they could serve God wholeheartedly because they loved Him and wanted to please Him by their faithful and diligent obedience.

Their ears could either be open to his commands, or they could stop them up and only listen when it pleased them to do so – giving Him only a little attention, now and then. In fact, those are the very options that are open to us with regard to God's Word and its demands in our lives. We can either listen or not, as we choose.

The Open Ear

If we want an example of someone who always listened to what God had to say, and who never once failed to do his bidding, we need look no further than the Lord Jesus Christ. This is what the prophet said about how he would behave, when describing the perfect Servant who would always obey his Master:

"The Lord God has given me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to

*speak a word in season to him who is weary. He awakens me morning by morning, **he awakens my ear to hear as the learned.** The Lord God has opened my ear; and I was not rebellious, nor did I turn away" (Isaiah 50:4,5).*

Such was his loving response that Jesus was completely willing to do what his Father asked of him. As the prophet goes on to say, Jesus was willing to suffer physical pain, and to give his life as a sacrifice for sin. He died so that we might be freed from the slavery of sin and death (see Isaiah 50:6-8; 53:1-12). The wonderful message of the gospel is that we can be freed from those things to become the servants of the Lord and to stay in his service forever.

Ears to Hear

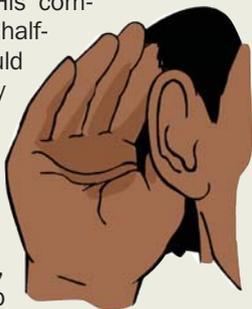
All we need is a willingness to listen to what God is saying to us in the Bible, a mind which is prepared to think things through, and an attitude whereby we will respond to the love of God by seeking to obey Him to please Him.

It all starts with what we hear for, as the apostle Paul once wrote: *"Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Romans 10:17).*

If we hear the Word of God, we are half way to believing it, and if we give it a chance it will persuade us and motivate us to do the will of God. It has that sort of living and energising power, because it is the Word of God.

Jesus summed up what is needed when he made this comment about our ears. He didn't direct us to pierce them: he told us to use them in this way:

"He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" (Matthew 11:15, and 7 other times).



Editor

Abraham, a Promise, and You

Could a promise made about 4000 years ago be relevant to people living in the 21st century? Yes, if it was a promise made by God which offered salvation from sin and death to those who believed it and lived accordingly. That is what **Hamilton Wilson** now explains in this article which examines the way in which an Old Testament event is explained and applied in New Testament times.

Statement and Explanation

Right from the start the Bible can be seen to state a fact and then enlarge upon its meaning. The very first verse says: *“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”*, and the next two sentences explain how that Creation took place, by the operation of God’s power released by His word of power:

“The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light” (Genesis 1:1-3).

It should therefore come as no surprise when the Bible records something that God says but does not immediately analyse or explain the full implications of that statement. The challenge is for its readers to deduce the important themes and ideas that are being gradually revealed, and sometimes it is hundreds, if not thousands of years, before the full implications are discussed, in the light of later developments. As an example, notice what

happens in the early chapters of the Book of Genesis:

God creates man and woman and places them in paradise (a garden situation) and wants them to obey His law. They disobey, are expelled from the garden, and bring sin and death into the world (Genesis chapters 2 and 3)

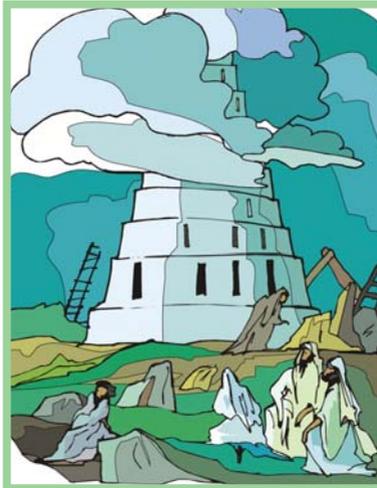
Within a few chapters, the world is so full of wickedness that God sends a flood to destroy mankind, although He also offers a way of escape (Genesis 6-9). Only eight people want to know, and are saved!

Within a few more chapters the world has been repopulated but human society is determined to exalt its own importance regardless of the will of God. The Tower of Babel is built, provoking God’s intervention.

The tower is destroyed and the people are scattered, thus bringing into existence three races of people derived respectively from Noah’s three sons: Shem, Ham and Japheth (Genesis 10-11).

God’s Offer and Promise

Notice how these chapters (Genesis



2-11) spell out clearly that God wants men and women who will obey Him and do what He says, but that very few people are so inclined. God is inviting people to share in what He has to offer, but most people just don't want to know. Adam's bad example seems to be the one that almost everyone wants to follow. And then, out of one of the three races of people that have emerged – the descendants of Shem (the Semitic line) comes this remarkable promise:

“Now the LORD had said to Abram: ‘Get out of your country, from your kindred and from your father’s house, to a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’ So Abram departed as the LORD had spoken to him, and Lot went with him. And Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran” (Genesis 12:1-4).

Note what this promise includes. It concerns:

- ◆ a land;
- ◆ a nation
- ◆ Abram’s name to be great;
- ◆ Blessings and curses on those who bless or curse Abram’s seed – *“in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed”*

As it turns out, this is one of the great promises of the Bible, yet it neither says precisely what nation would be derived from Abram (who was later re-named Abraham), nor what the blessing was,

nor how it would come about.

Abram and his immediate descendants were left to await developments and to wait and see how things would work out. We have a huge advantage in that respect in that we can now look back thousands of years and see what happened. Abraham indeed became the



father of a great nation; for from him and his descendants came the Jewish and Arab people.

Apart from the 14 million Jews there are now, living in different parts of the world, there are about 100 million Arabs in the Middle East, both Semitic people who look back appreciatively to Abraham as their originator.

But what was the Blessing God promised and how would it come about? It’s worth noting that often in the Bible when you come across the word “blessing” it is relating back to this great promise made by God.

New Testament Explanation

Someone once said that what the Old Testament conceals the New Testament reveals, and there’s a good reason for that. It was some 2000 years after Abraham that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. He was the Son of God, born of the virgin Mary by the power of God, so that he could save God’s people from their sins (Matthew 1:21). When Jesus died, as a sacrifice for sin, in complete obedience to the will of his Father, he brought the long promised Blessing. This is what the apostle Peter said about what Jesus had accomplished as he explained what God’s promise in Genesis chapter 12 was really about:

“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).

The blessing is the forgiveness of sins through Jesus! And, in case we didn't understand that straight away, the apostle Paul also explains that, in fact several times over, both in the Acts and in some of his letters:

"We declare to you glad tidings – that promise which was made to the fathers. God has fulfilled this for us their children, in that he has raised up Jesus. As it is also written in the second Psalm: 'You are my Son, today I have begotten you.' ... Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins" (Acts 13:32-38).

Giving a detailed explanation about Abraham's faith in Romans chapter 4, Paul says much about the blessing (see Romans 4:6-9) that God had promised him, and about later promises that were made to King David. Again it is the forgiveness of sins that is uppermost in his thinking:

"Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man to whom the Lord shall not impute sin" (Romans 4:7,8).

And he adds an important further explanation. This blessing – the forgiveness of sins – it not just available to Abraham's natural descendants; it is available to all who share

Abraham's faith, whether Jew or Gentile:

"Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed, not only to those who are of the law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all (as it is written, 'I have made you a father of many nations')" (Romans 4:16,17).

Abraham's Seed

So it is not only the Jews who are the "seed" of Abraham, but all those who show the faith and ready obedience of Abraham. Paul further explains the position in his letter to the Galatians (see chapter 3, verses 6-16 and 26-29 in particular), where he underlines the fact that the promise God made is not limited to the natural seed of Abraham, the Jews, but to those of all nations. In fact here he explains that natural descent will not suffice. Both Jews and Gentiles must have Abraham's faith if they are to obtain the forgiveness of sins that God offers:

"Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the nations by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, 'In you all the nations shall be blessed.' So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham ... Christ

has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree'), that the blessing of Abraham might come



upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith" (Galatians 3:7-9,13-14).

Sins Forgiven

The promise (of forgiveness) made by the Spirit, and recorded in Genesis chapter 12, can only come upon those who first believe, as did Abraham, and then who obey the commandments of God. Adam disobeyed and brought a curse upon mankind. If we do what God asks of us, we can obtain a blessing and be the means of bringing a blessing to others, when we share with them the message of God's offer of salvation. God asks believers to be baptized, by burial in water, as an act of association with Jesus, who died and rose again. This is how Paul explains it:

"For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on

*Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And **if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise**" (Galatians 3:26-29).*

Natural descent is not the issue. It is rather about our willingness to bury the past in the waters of baptism and to start a new life with Christ. The promise of forgiveness of sins through the death and resurrection of Jesus, and of eternal life in him, is available to all. God is still calling out a people who will be His for evermore. It's amazing to think that when God made that wonderful promise to Abraham so long ago, He had you and me in mind. It only remains for us to take advantage of this great privilege and seek the forgiveness of our sins by coming to Jesus in faith and through baptism.

Hamilton Wilson

The Miracles of Jesus (2)

Healing the Nobleman's Son

Many of the miracles of Jesus consisted of healing the sick and this is one of them but in this case the healing was performed on a lad who lived many miles away which makes it all the more remarkable.

The account of the miracle is in John chapter 4, verses 46-54, and commences with details of a certain nobleman whose son was sick at Capernaum. As soon as this nobleman

heard that Jesus was in the vicinity, he went to him, imploring him to come and heal his son. Jesus was in Cana in Galilee at the time, so the nobleman must have travelled about 15 miles from Capernaum to see Jesus. No doubt he thought this was a good opportunity, because Jesus had just arrived there from Judea and that was about 60 miles away! He also may have heard some while before about the way that Jesus had turned water into wine at the wedding in Cana. That

was probably the talk of the entire district: it was such a marvellous miracle!

The Nobleman

Nobody knows for sure who this nobleman was, but this is the only time the Greek word translated “nobleman” is used in the New Testament and scholars say that it conveys the sense of royalty. He may therefore have been related to Herod Antipas, who was the Tetrarch of Galilee at that time.

He is called “King Herod” in Mark 6:14 and family members could well have been living somewhere in Galilee, such as Capernaum.

The nobleman was obviously very worried about his son:

“He went to Jesus and implored him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death” (John 4:47).

To expect a complete stranger like Jesus (and his disciples) to undertake a 15 mile journey for his son’s benefit indicates the measure of his anxiety. His request also shows that he thought Jesus was the kind of man who would be willing to comply. Yet despite his obvious anxiety, Jesus was at first non-committal. He said: *“Unless you people see signs and wonders, you will by no means believe.”*

But the nobleman did not respond aggressively to this reproach. Instead he just politely persisted in his request saying, “Sir, come down before my child dies!” (v.49). To him it was a matter of life and death.

It now appears that the remark Jesus

made was designed to assess the extent of the man’s faith and that his patient response showed what sort of

man he was: willing to accept rebukes and rebuffs if only his son could be healed. Being satisfied, Jesus made an amazing statement:

“Jesus said to him, ‘Go your way; your son lives.’ So the man believed the word that Jesus

spoke to him, and he went his way” (John 4:50).

He Believed

If his earlier approach to Jesus and his patient reaction had indicated the sort of man he was, his willingness to return to Capernaum fully believing that what Jesus had said was indeed true is quite remarkable. And so was the sequel:

“And as he was now going down his servants met him and told him saying, ‘Your son lives!’” (4:51). Eager to check that the recovery was really due to the power wielded by Jesus, the nobleman eagerly inquired when it was that his son got better. And they said to him, ‘Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him.’ So the father knew that it was at the same hour in which Jesus said to him, ‘Your son lives.’ And he himself believed, and his whole household” (John 4:52,53).

It is clear that this healing of the child’s illness was accomplished in Capernaum, some 15 miles from Cana which makes the miracle all the more



remarkable. If Jesus could cure at such a distance it means that the power he possessed was not restricted by distance and was comparable with the omnipotent and omnipresent power of God himself.

God's Power at Work

King David appreciated the wonderful power of his God, which is everywhere present, which he described at length in the 139th Psalm. Here are some extracts:

"O LORD, you have searched me and known me. You know my sitting down and my rising up; you understand my thought afar off ... Where can I go from your Spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend into heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in hell, behold, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me" (Psalm 139:1,2,7-10).

A practical illustration of this last statement occurred when the wayward prophet Jonah had the traumatic experience of finding himself sinking in a tempestuous sea. He had been thrown there by fearful mariners but was miraculously swallowed by a great fish 'prepared' by the LORD. He remained imprisoned in its belly for three days and from there he prayed to the LORD. The LORD then spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land! (Jonah 2:10)

From these two passages we can

form some idea of the wonderful all-pervading power of God. Jesus, the Son of God, evidently shared a measure of this power, which God had given him (John 5:19) in that he was able to cure a child so far away. And the result of the exercise of that power is precisely what was intended. The miracle was a sign of the authority of Jesus: a reason why people should believe in him. And that's what happened here.

The nobleman was so impressed by the magnitude of the miracle that, as the record stated, *'he himself believed and his whole household.'*

The members of his household must have been similarly impressed, even though they had neither met Jesus nor heard him utter that word of power. Yet they came to believe in Jesus as the Son of God.

Towards the end of his gospel record, John made a point of informing his readers why he had selected the seven signs or miracles that he had recorded. He wrote words that should encourage us too:

"Truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:30,31).

Ralph Green



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Part Five

God's New Society

The apostle Peter had baptised Gentile believers in Caesarea, and that dramatic development opened up the way for the work of the great apostle Paul. He and Barnabas set out from Syria on what is popularly called "The First Missionary Journey" and that resulted in the gospel spreading far afield. As **Tom Barling** now explains, that opened up an opportunity for Gentiles to hear and accept the gospel, and many were keen to join this new community.

First Missionary Journey

It was God who provided the initiative for the new preaching venture, as the Book of Acts makes clear:

"While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off" (Acts 13:2,3).

The two apostles set out first for Cyprus, then Asia Minor, the modern Turkey, all territories that were then part of the Roman Empire. At Antioch Paul preached the gospel in the synagogue, to a mixed audience of orthodox Jews and "God-fearers", men and women who like Cornelius before them, attended the synagogue but did not accept all the obligations of the Mosaic law. In his discourse Paul made this great pronouncement:

"Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be

justified from by the law of Moses" (13:38,39).

Here in a nutshell we have the message that was later developed in Paul's letters to the Galatians and the Romans. The offer of salvation was to Jews and Gentiles alike on the basis of God's offer in His Son, Jesus Christ. In the process it was declaring that Jew and Gentile were equal before God, and this most of the Jews in the apostle's audience could not accept.

Crowd Trouble

Matters came to a dramatic head the following Sabbath. The news of what happened in the synagogue had spread in the city and the next Sabbath the synagogue was crowded. When the orthodox Jews saw the great number, they were furious and attacked the reputation of Paul and Barnabas in a vain effort to undermine their message. Paul and his companion then uttered the fateful words:

"We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles" (13:46).



The response of the Gentiles was enthusiastic and the result was that the gospel was now established not just in Antioch itself but throughout the whole region (v.49). Thus we begin to see the remarkable fulfilment of the words of the Lord Jesus:

"Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit" (Matthew 21:43).

What happened in Antioch became a pattern that was often repeated. The apostles preached the gospel, first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles, and those Jews who were unwilling to accept the message organised persecution and came in pursuit of the apostles and their converts. In Lystra they stirred up the people to such an extent that Paul was stoned and left for dead (Acts 14:19). However, he recovered. In the next town, Derbe, Paul and Barnabas received a more friendly reception.

Gentile Believers

If we now take stock of what had been happening, the position is like this. At the beginning, those who accepted the Lord Jesus were exclusively Jews; by the end of the First Missionary Journey the majority of the new converts were uncircumcised Gentiles. A great historical movement was under way which nothing could stop. We cannot be sure of the exact nationality of the new converts; in the case of Lystra, for example, we learn they were native Lycaonians (see Acts 14:11).

Their precise nationality does not mat-



ter however, for they were all members of God's new society: sharing a common faith, recognising that all men and women are sinners in need of repentance, and all ready to accept the salvation that was extended to them in the Lord Jesus.

When Paul and Barnabas returned to their base in Syrian Antioch, the local ecclesia (church) assembled and heard the exciting news of what had happened during their ministry. The inspired

writer Luke makes a delightful comment when he says that they had opened *"the door of faith to the Gentiles"* (Acts 14:27).

Notice once more this all-important word: *"faith"*. It is absolutely vital that we believe what God has revealed in His Word, and live accordingly.

Jewish Reaction Back Home

It was inevitable that news of what had been happening overseas would reach Judea and Jerusalem. Some of the Jewish believers were particularly disturbed that some of the converts, coming from a completely pagan background, had not been circumcised. They thought that was vital for salvation, for both Jews and Gentiles. So a number of them went down to Antioch to explain their view that:

"Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved" (Acts 15:1).

As Paul and Barnabas took an entirely different view it was decided that the problem should be discussed with the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. So a meeting took place which is now known as the "Council of Jerusalem".

We can understand why some believers who had previously been Pharisees were uncompromising. Their background and training in the Jewish religion led them to argue that: *“The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses”* (v.5).

- ☞ The apostle Peter’s contribution to the debate was important, for he told the council how God had given the Holy Spirit to uncircumcised believers at Caesarea.
- ☞ Then Paul and Barnabas told their story: they had been able to perform miracles among the Gentiles, an undoubted sign of God’s approval (v.9-12).
- ☞ Finally, James, the half-brother of the Lord Jesus, made his contribu-

tion and what he recommended was adopted.

There was no mention of circumcision but the Gentile converts were asked to eat no food which had been sacrificially offered to idols, to abstain from sexual immorality, and to avoid meat with the blood still in it (v.19-21). This was a compromise but it would enable Jewish and Gentile believers to eat together.

A sensible compromise can do so much to avoid strife. Although Paul would later encounter continuing opposition from those who just could not see that the Law of Moses was no longer binding, under the hand of God the gospel message was to achieve increasing success and God’s new society would spread ever further afield.

Tom Barling

What Difference Does Baptism Really Make?

*When the Bible speaks about baptism it refers to the total immersion of an adult. This is the Scriptural pattern: “When they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized” (Acts 8:12). In this article **Peter Forbes** explores the implications of such a baptism.*

Are You God’s Enemy?

A commonly held view is that a Christian is anyone who tries to serve God. The reasoning is that as God is a God of Love, He wants everyone in His kingdom. But that reasoning is wrong; it is fundamentally flawed. What the Bible actually says is that by nature we are God’s enemies and can only be His friends if we do something about it. Look at these Scriptures:

Writing to believers in Rome the Apostle Paul, speaking of the position his readers were in before they were baptized, says that it is only the death of Christ that makes it possible to change our situation: *“For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by his life” (Romans 5:10);*

He uses similar language writing to the believers in Colosse saying: *“you, who*

once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now he has reconciled in the body of his flesh through death" (Colossians 1:21,22);

Writing to believers in Ephesus Paul speaks of the position they were in before being baptized in this way: "at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been made near by the blood of Christ" (Ephesians 2:12,13).

From these passages we learn that those who are not baptized are God's enemies. They have no part with the promises that He has made. This teaching might seem harsh. It may seem to be unloving. However it is what the Bible teaches. There is no hope for mankind unless that hope is what God offers, and on the terms that He offers it. He wants us to understand our relationship with Him so that we might see our need of salvation. Salvation for mankind is not universal. It is conditional: it depends upon our willingness to submit to His requirements.

God's Enemy or God's Friend?

You may be thinking something to yourself that goes along these lines: "I try my best to please God. I don't commit any major sins. I go to church regularly. I am kind to people. I pray to Him. I read His Word, the Bible. Isn't that enough? After all, I am sincere in my beliefs. Surely God understands that?" Perhaps many people feel like that, but however many hold

that point of view what really matters is what God says about the matter. We must do what God wants of us and we can only know that by reading the Bible and following its teaching.

Now the Bible teaches that sincerity is not sufficient. It was Joshua, who led Israel into the Promised Land, who linked sincerity with truth, in this way. Addressing the nation about the things that really mattered, he said:

"Now therefore, fear the LORD, serve him in sincerity and in truth, and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the River and in Egypt. Serve the LORD!" (Joshua 24:14).

This is not to question the sincerity of many good-living people, who do their best. What it shows is that God wants something more than just sincerity. Being sincerely wrong is no good for God. The Bible makes it clear that sincerity must be matched with truth. The question to ask yourself is: "Do you want to serve God as His enemy?"

for that is the relationship that those who are not baptized have with God.

How to be Reconciled

Look again at two of the passages quoted above:

"You, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now he has reconciled in the body of his flesh through death" (Colossians 1:21,22);

"For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of



Joshua at the great stone in Shechem (Joshua 24:26)

his Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by his life” (Romans 5:10);

In both passages Paul is speaking to those who have been baptized and talks about them being ‘reconciled.’ By this he means that they have a changed relationship with God. Before baptism they were God’s enemies. After baptism they were ‘reconciled’ to God.

That contrast is seen over and over again. We looked at Ephesians 2:12, which spoke of the way in which the unbaptized person is separated from the promises of God, but look how Paul continues:

“At that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been made near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of division between us, having abolished in his flesh the enmity ... so as to create in himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that he might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity” (Ephesians 2:12-16).

It is the sacrifice of Jesus Christ that changes the relationship and Baptism is the only way that we identify with that death, and with the resurrection of Jesus too.

Personal Need?

“All well and good, you might say, but I am

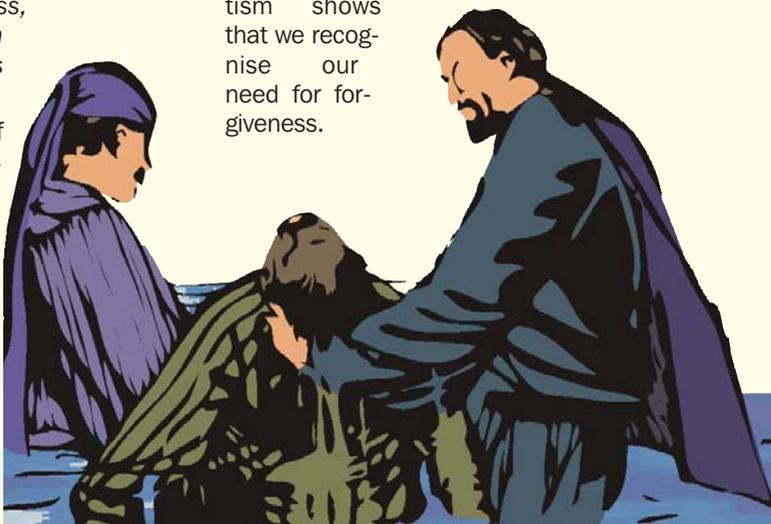
happy as I am.” Such an attitude may stem from not understanding the sorry state that we are all in, if not baptized. In the letter to the Romans, Paul spends almost two and a half chapters showing that men and women do not please God. He shows that everyone does things which displease Him. His conclusion is: *“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).*

We all stand condemned before God because of the way things are with us. But the next verse presents a wonderful hope, and tells us that we can be rescued from this dreadful situation:

“Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:24).

We can be justified and redeemed, but that happy state of affairs cannot come until we realise our need for forgiveness and submit to the command of Peter: *“Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins...” (Acts 2:38).*

The challenge is: “Do you have a personal need for forgiveness?” We have all sinned; we are all in need of forgiveness. The sacrifice of Jesus makes this possible. Baptism shows that we recognise our need for forgiveness.



Where Do You Fit In?

Those who are baptized are described as God's children or sons. Here are two Scriptural passages that make that wonderful connection:

"Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when he is revealed, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2);

"The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs – heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with him, that we may also be glorified together" (Romans 8:16-17).

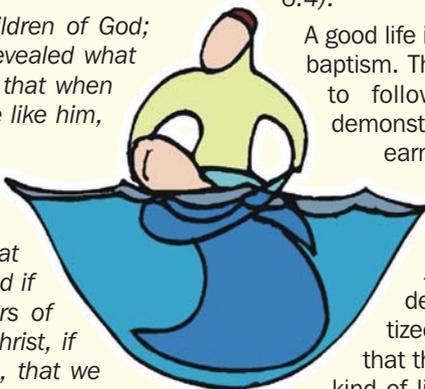
What a marvellous outcome. We can become members of God's family and His heirs, indeed *"joint heirs with Christ"* (Romans 8:17).

So What Is Baptism?

The Bible teaches that baptism is being covered by water and coming out of the water. In symbol it is like dying with Jesus and being raised from the dead. But what should be going on in our mind when we are baptized? The Apostle Peter says that baptism is more than mere washing in water, it is the answer of a good conscience towards God (1 Peter 3:21). Peter says that baptism is an act that is undertaken because our conscience condemns us. We will see the need for baptism when we come to the awareness that we are sinners in need of forgiveness, because we fall short of God's glory.

Baptism is not a substitute for trying to live like Jesus. Baptism shows that we want to try to live like Jesus lived. As Paul said, again when writing to the Romans:

"Therefore we were buried with him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4).



A good life is not a substitute for baptism. The Christ-like life has to follow baptism; it will demonstrate that we were in earnest when in baptism

we put to death our old life and began to live with Jesus. Some people decide not to be baptized because they say that they could not live the kind of life that God requires and so it would be hypocritical to

be baptized. In a sense this is an understandable way of thinking, for none of us can live up to the high standard set by Jesus. However it is not a Scriptural attitude. God does not set standards for us to follow knowing that we will fail, so that He can punish us. Nor would we be the first to recognise our shortcomings. The Apostle Paul laid out his struggle for all to read. Romans chapter 7 details his struggle. Summarising his words he says 'I want to do the right things, but I find that often I do the wrong things'. And he emerges from that struggle within himself to declare that God will never condemn us if we continue to want to do the things that please Him (see Romans 8:1).

It is Baptism that can change your relationship to God. You will then no longer be God's enemy but one of His children. And as a baptized believer, you will start to live a new life with Christ, and have hope of everlasting life in God's Coming Kingdom.

Peter Forbes

“Bread upon the Waters”

A man once took over a piece of derelict land and worked hard to clear it and plant rice.

Some months later a friend congratulated him on the prospect of a big harvest, and said: “God has blessed you well in this first year. Don’t forget to thank Him for it”. “I wonder if I should”, was the rather surly reply, “You should have seen what this land was like when God had it to Himself!”

Left to Ourselves

The story was meant to be funny, but it is chiefly remarkable for its blasphemy. It scores a point with a certain cleverness, but at the expense of truth. What could this self-satisfied rice farmer have done if God had left him with the land to himself? Would there have been the required amount of rain from heaven? Would there have been the required warmth to germinate the seed and the long days of sunshine to stimulate growth and to ripen the crop? Hardly!

But though men often leave a job half-finished while they go on to something else, God never does: “He makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matthew 5:45). And it is because of this faithfulness that men everywhere may sow in faith and should reap in thankfulness,

What a pity, then, that men tend to forget God’s part in the impressive annual

cycle of life, and think that they have only themselves to thank.

Having Faith in God

The basic Christian virtue is faith. “Without faith it is impossible to please God” (Hebrews 11:6). Can it be that God has designed His world in such a way that some of the most ordinary experiences of life will tend to develop our appreciation for the small things, as well as the great things?

“Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days” (Ecclesiastes 11:1) may well refer to the planting of rice, cast upon the paddy fields. That which could be food for the farmer is used instead as his crop for sowing, to become a bounteous harvest “after many days”.

But this wise saying is also used as an illustration of the faith which God wants men and women to show in all departments of life, especially with regard to Christian giving. As another Scripture puts it:

“Blessed are you who sow beside all waters, who send out freely the feet of the ox and the donkey” (Isaiah 32:20).

Again the reference is to rice cultivation. Evidently in Palestine in ancient days not only was the ox used, but the donkey also. It is a further reminder that even the man who thinks he is clever enough to manage without God will get nowhere unless God blesses his endeavours.

Harry Whittaker



Have You Read?

About Mary – Mother of Jesus

Who was she?



As a young woman, living in the Roman-occupied land of Palestine, Mary gave birth to Jesus after becoming pregnant through God's Holy Spirit. She later married Joseph and they lived with their family in Nazareth. At the age of 30 Jesus left his mother in Galilee and began a preaching mission that lasted more than 3 years.

What was life like in the land of Palestine (Israel) at that time?



En route to safety in Egypt

The land was divided into administrative districts and governed by various members of the political bureaucracy, often depending on who was in or out of favour with Caesar. The country flitted from government by monarch to Roman procurators, depending on the political situation. From 37-4 BC Herod the Great unified the area, though Rome was still the ultimate power. It was Caesar Augustus who issued the decree that a world-wide census should take place and it was while Quirinius was governor that Joseph and Mary had to travel to Bethlehem to register (Luke 2:1-2.)

When did it happen?

Mary was probably born about 20BC. The gospel account of her covers 4BC-30AD (approximately, since the chronology of the times is not clear.)

Where will I find it?

- ❖ *Mary's early life: Matthew chapters 1&2; Luke chapters 1&2*
- ❖ *During Jesus' ministry: Matt.12:46-49, Jn. 2:1-11*
- ❖ *At Jesus' crucifixion: Jn.19:25*

What should I look out for?



- ⌘ Mary's obedient, Godly nature (Lk.1:38.) Her deep expression of faith (Lk. 1:46-55) shows her understanding of God's purpose and love for mankind
- ⌘ She would have been an unmarried mother if Joseph had not married her. He planned to break off their relationship (Matt 1:19-20) until God spoke to him. The public stigma of illegitimacy, though, remained into Jesus' adulthood (Jn.8:41)
- ⌘ Mary had to give birth in a strange place (Lk. 2:4), away from her family, to fulfil the prophecy that a Saviour would be born in Bethlehem (Matt.2:4-5, Micah 5:2)
- ⌘ She and Joseph were poor. After Jesus' birth they were only able to give the basic offering required by the Law of Moses (Lk.2:22-24; Lev.12:6)
- ⌘ Mary and her husband had normal marital relations after Jesus' birth (Matt.1:18) and went on to have at least six more children after Jesus (Matt.13:55-56)
- ⌘ Wise and astute (Lk.2:51) Mary showed confidence in her son (Jn.2:3-5) although she did not always understand him (Lk.2:41-49; Matt.12:46-50; Mk.3:31-35; Lk.8:19-21)
- ⌘ 'Yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also,' prophesied Simeon (Lk. 2:35). Perhaps a widow when Jesus began his ministry, Mary endured the pain of losing a good companion and confidante. She would suffer, too, hearing how unpopular Jesus was with the religious leaders. Her final pain was to stand by at his crucifixion, when she must have wished to bear the agony for him.
- ⌘ After Jesus' ascension to his Father, the Bible tells of Mary, now part of the early church, praying together with Jesus' disciples, her sons and others in the upper room (Acts 1:14)
- ⌘ God would not have placed his Son in a household where His Word and His Ways would not be honoured. Mary was an exceptional woman; that is why God chose her to be Jesus' mother. But Scripture shows she was mortal, with the same weaknesses as us.

What does this mean for me?

- ⌘ Mary's song (Lk.1:46-55) shows how well she understood that her yet-unborn Son would turn the world upside down, fulfilling the promises made to Abraham long before. We, too, can be associated with these promises (Gal.3:6-9) of everlasting life in God's kingdom.
- ⌘ Jesus reflected Mary's obedient nature. As parents, example helps form a child's character. Are we that good example?
- ⌘ Mary and Jesus endured public humiliation for the glory of God. Do we obey God's will, even when it makes us different from the rest?
- ⌘ Mary and Jesus cared for each other to the end (Jn. 19.26-27). Does our care for others continue when our lives are under pressure?

Joan Lewis

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