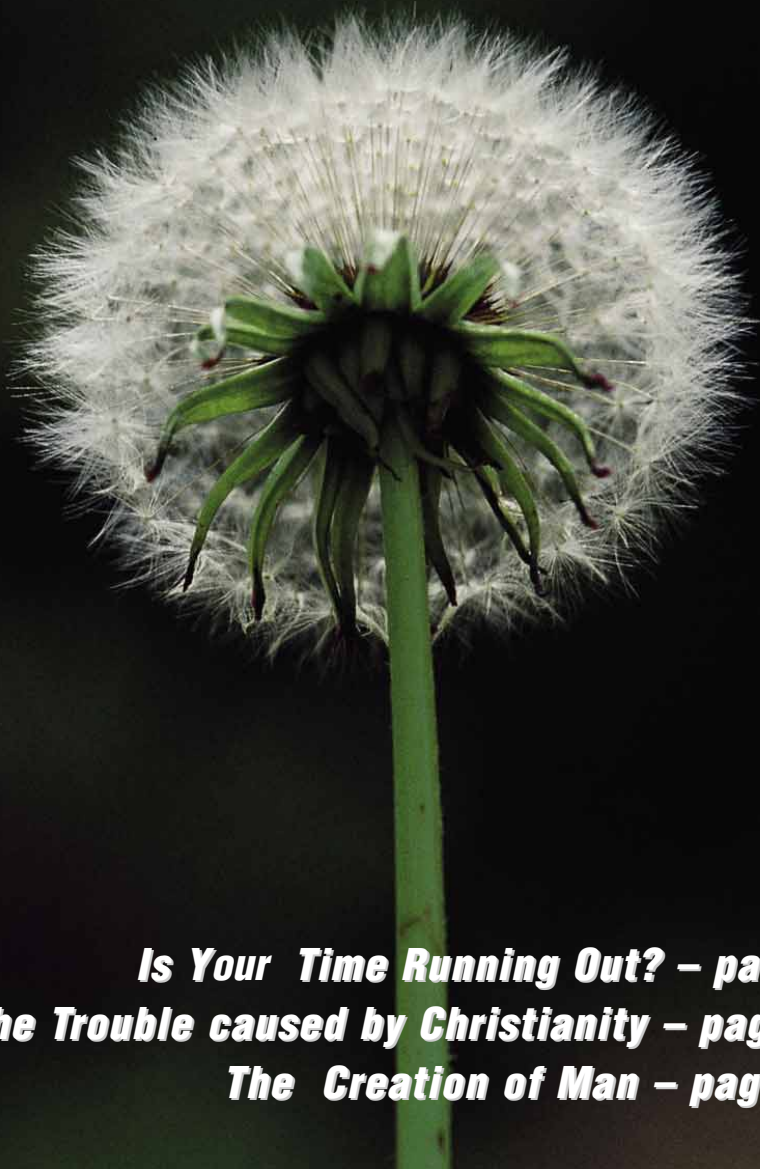


Glad Tidings

OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

1483



Is Your Time Running Out? – page 3
The Trouble caused by Christianity – page 8
The Creation of Man – page 12

Glad Tidings

OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

123rd Year

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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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Is Your Time Running Out?

A gardener, seeing a dandelion about to discharge its head of seeds, knows that time is running out with his attempt to eradicate this weed in the garden.

One puff of wind and the seeds will be gone, floating off on their tiny parachutes and landing who knows where, elsewhere in the garden. He knows he should have killed those dandelions long ago; long before the seed head was formed.

Telling the Time

As a child, you may well have picked dandelion heads to see if they do indeed tell the time. Somebody once said that the number of puffs needed to disperse the seeds matches the time of day: three puffs and it will be three o'clock, and so on! It says a lot for the design of the plant that it has been made to look so exquisite that it is photographed, and that children are attracted to it. For their puff gives the seeds greater carrying power than might otherwise have proved possible. It's another indication that the world in which we live is wonderfully designed in so many different ways.

For an older person, the dandelion has a rather more sober message to convey. By the time the yellow flower has gone and the white-headed seeds have been formed, the life of the plant

is nearly over. The wind may disperse the seeds and start another life cycle, this time many different dandelions; but the parent plant will die and cease to exist. Its life done, it will return to the ground from whence it came, such a short time before.

The Flower Fades

The prophet Isaiah was not thinking about dandelions. He was thinking about all plant life, which lives and then dies, when he said:

"All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, because the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades ..." (Isaiah 40:6-8).

What a thought! When we get older and our hair turns white, just like that of a dandelion, we could be about to wither and fade away. It would be grim reality indeed were it not for Isaiah's next few words:

"The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever" (Isaiah 40:8).

Old and New

What Isaiah said about the human condition is an abiding truth, one we are forced to recognise every day. We are all getting older and we cannot escape that process in this life. But



there is a way of combating the ageing process and of becoming new-made men and women.

As the New Testament begins, the prophet Isaiah's words from 600 years before are heard again, spoken this time by John the Baptist who was preparing the way for the Lord Jesus. Standing on the banks of the River Jordan and calling people to repentance and baptism, he announced:

"It is written in the Prophets: 'Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you'. The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight'" (Mark 1:2,3).

He was picking up where Isaiah had left off, using his prophecy as the connection between the Old and New Testaments. Jesus was the one who could make all the difference. For 600 years, since Isaiah, thousands of people had died – they had withered away and faded like the grass of the field. Now someone had come who was going to live forever and he would make everlasting life possible for others as well.

Born Again

Some time later Jesus spoke with a leader of the Jewish people and told him the secret of everlasting life. He told Nicodemus, a Jewish theologian, that if he wanted to live forever in the Kingdom of God he must be born again. Nicodemus was perplexed and curious; he asked how that might be

achieved, so Jesus explained:

"Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (John 3:5,6).

There is a choice to be made about how we want to spend our time. Live according to the natural desires of human nature (what Scripture means by "the flesh") and you will end up dead like a spent dandelion plant. Learn about God and follow His ways (by being baptized and developing spiritual mindedness) and God will give you the gift of everlasting life when His Kingdom is established on earth. The apostle Peter referred to the very words of Isaiah when he summed up the challenge in these words:

"Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart, having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever, because 'All flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of the grass. The grass withers, and its flower falls away, but the word of the Lord endures forever.'" (1 Peter 1:22-25).

Then he added this pointed comment about how we can achieve that transformation. It is the "word of the Lord" that can change our way of thinking and alter the course of our life. And, Peter says: "Now this is the word which by the gospel was preached to you" (1:25).

Editor

Paul in Athens

*Forced to move on, the apostle Paul has now come to Athens, the capital of Greece. In the ancient world it was a centre of great secular learning, some of whose inhabitants had the reputation of being the “keenest in intellect”. How would they respond when Paul told them about the gospel of salvation and the great offer of eternal life through Jesus Christ? That is what **John Hellawell** now explains.*

Jesus and the Resurrection

Paul took advantage of his time in Athens to continue his preaching, both in the synagogue to Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as daily in the market-place to anyone who was prepared to listen. He was particularly distressed by all the idols he saw being worshipped. Since this was fairly common in most Greco-Roman cities, it must have been particularly bad in Athens.

In due course he found himself in dispute with a group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers who challenged his beliefs. Some were asking what this “babbling” was trying to say. The word is literally “seed-picker” – suggesting that the apostle was a picker-up of trifles, someone who was just repeating bits-and-pieces of what he had heard from others. Others thought that he was advocating foreign gods because he was preaching about ‘Jesus’ and ‘the resurrection’. Because the Greek word for “resurrection” is *anastasis*, it seems they thought that Paul was teaching about two deities – Jesus and Anastasis!

The Areopagus

Paul was taken to a meeting of the Areopagus where he was questioned regarding this new teaching. The Areopagus was a court which licensed the teachers of the university in Athens and it would seem that they wished to examine Paul’s credentials. Luke notes that the Athenians and the foreign residents in Athens spent all of their time listening to the latest ideas and discussing them.

→ Stoics

For Stoics, courage in the face of danger and suffering, and indifference to material circumstances were the basis of their philosophy. These qualities have given rise to the concept of “stoicism” in the present day. Stoics believed that human life is governed by an iron fate so that it is pointless to struggle against it. Stoics were thus indifferent to pain or sorrow: hardships and pleasures were to be encountered with sublime indifference. Material possessions were of little significance since these could be replaced if lost, but, for them, loss of self-respect was far more serious.



*The site of the Areopagus from
The Acropolis in Athens*

→ Epicureans

For Epicureans the prime good was pleasure, for body and mind. Passive pleasures were superior to active ones. For Epicureans the senses were the only source of ideas and the criterion for truth.

How would the apostle be able effectively to present the gospel to such a curious and complicated audience? Could he take advantage of their evident interest in religion to proclaim the true and only God and to explain His message of salvation? He could and he did!

Golden Opportunity

Before the Court of Areopagus, Paul seized the opportunity to outline the gospel. In doing so he tailored his approach to the circumstances and to his audience. He began by saying that he had noted that in every respect they were very religious. He continued by adding that wherever he looked as he went around their city he saw their objects of worship. He had even found an altar with the inscription:

“To an Unknown God”

Now, he said, he would enlighten their ignorance by proclaiming this God to them. The God they did not know was the God who made the world and everything it contains. He does not live in temples constructed by human hands (as their gods did!) nor does He need to be served by human hands (like their gods), because He is in need of nothing. On the contrary, He provides for mankind. He gives them life and breath and everything else. What is more, God created man and from the first man (Adam) he populated the whole world with a variety of nations, predetermining their history and their boundaries. In doing this, God intended that men should seek Him,

reaching after Him to find Him, even though, in reality, He is close at hand.

Contemporary References

Paul then made two quotations from Gentile poets, who would be well known to the Athenian intellectuals:

“For in him we live and move and have our being” and *“We are (also) his offspring”*

The first quotation is from Epimenides the Cretan, who makes Minos address his father Zeus:

*“They carved a tomb for thee, O
holy and high one -
The Cretans, always liars, evil
beasts, slow bellies!**

*But thou art not dead: forever thou
art living and risen,
For in thee we live and move and
have our being”.*

The second line is also quoted in Titus 1:12, where Paul asserts that the Cretans are always liars – suggesting that this was the only time that one of them spoke the truth when he admitted that all Cretans were liars!

The second quotation is from the poet Aratus who, like Paul, came from Cilicia. He wrote a poem on natural phenomena and declared this of the supreme God. It has been commented that: *“The Epicureans would approve of the sentiment that God needs nothing from men while the Stoics would have agreed that he is the source of all life”*. Although no reference is made to this in the text, the third line of the quotation from Epimenides would be evidence that even Gentiles could comprehend the possibility of resurrection!

Repent!

Picking up his quotation from Aratus,

Paul said that if men are the “*offspring of God*” it is totally illogical to construct an image of a divine being from gold or silver or stone!

Paul then turned tables completely on those who thought that he was the ‘ignorant plagiarist’ or ‘babblor’. “In the past” he said “*God overlooked such ignorance*”. Then he added “*but now He commands everyone* (including Greek philosophers) *everywhere* (including Athens) *to repent!*” He went on to say:

“He has appointed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by the man whom he has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising him from the dead” (Acts 17:31).

This last comment divided the audience. Some sneered while others said that they wanted to hear him expound this subject again. Whether this was genuine or simply a polite way of dismissing him is not clear. Paul took the hint and left the Council. Some of the audience were convinced and became disciples. Among these was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, a woman called Damaris, and a few others.

Disappointed?

Some commentators have noted that Paul could not make much headway in Athens against the intellectual climate of a university city. He tried to meet them on their own terms and was disappointed by his failure. They suggest that from now on Paul resolved to avoid such an approach and concentrate on the simple basic message of the Gospel.

Evidence for this is to be found in 1 Corinthians where Paul repeatedly seems to be stressing that he deliberately avoided presenting the Gospel in an intellectual way. There are other passages (e.g. 1 Corinthians 8:1-7) where Paul deals with the folly of idols which was, of course, a point which he developed in Athens. Such quotations are held to fit with the hypothesis that Paul had resolved to avoid any intellectual approach in his preaching after his Athenian experiences.

However, it has to be recognised that Paul, as a faithful apostle, always tailored his message to his audience. In Athens he met the intellectuals on their own ground and demonstrated their untenable position. Like many academics today, they were not fundamentally interested in truth but “*spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas*” (Acts 17:21, NIV). Academic careers are made by postulating new (if ultimately untenable) ideas.

In Corinth he spoke to Jews, who were familiar with the message of the Old Testament, and to a cosmopolitan Gentile audience for whom intellectual academic arguments would be totally unsuitable. It was Paul’s aim to become “*all things to all men that he might by all means save some*” (1 Corinthians 9:22).

Before Silas and Timothy could join him, Paul left Athens and went on to Corinth. Here he had much more success, as we shall see in the next article.



John Hellowell

Part Two

The Trouble caused by Christianity

In the first part of this two-part article, **Lawrence Cave** showed that things went wrong with the way that people practised Christianity when it got mixed up with politics and was used as a means of uniting the Roman Empire at the time of the Emperor Constantine. Now he shows how things went from bad to worse.

- ➡ The Emperor Constantine became a powerful influence in the church
- ➡ The state began to control the church
- ➡ Emperors influenced what the church believed
- ➡ They persecuted those who disagreed with them
- ➡ The church became heavily involved in politics

Church beliefs guided by politicians

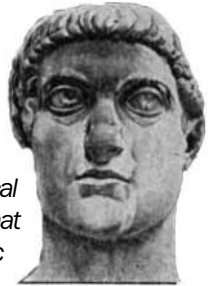
“The Times Atlas of World History” makes it clear that politics influenced church beliefs in the first few centuries of Christianity:

“Meanwhile important decisions, particularly the definition of doctrine, were made by the assembled clergy. Theoretically these councils represented the voice of the Church, but in practice Christianity as the state religion was often subject to imperial constraint.”

“The Chronicle of the World”, which portrays world history as newspaper reports, also confirms that politicians had a great influence on beliefs of the church:

➡ Council of Nicea, Asia Minor, 20 May 325

“The Emperor Constantine, dressed in purple robes to stress the sacred nature of his power, today inaugurated the Ecumenical Council of Nicea. What began as an academic theological debate



has spread to Christian congregations throughout the empire and there is a real danger of a lasting schism. Constantine is using his skills as a peacemaker in the spiritual sphere; his advisors have devised a compromise solution which looks likely to carry the Council.”

It is clear that Constantine’s main objective was to obtain an agreement to further his political aim of having a unified empire. Finding the truth of the matter so far as the religious issue was concerned does not seem to have been important.

The situation had not changed 65 years later, for *“The Chronicle of the World”* has the following report about the Roman Emperor Theodosius:

▶ **Roman Empire 25 December 390**

“... one of his first actions after he had established himself in power was to call an Ecumenical Council in Constantinople in 381 to unite the Church.”

“The Chronicle of the World” reveals the real motives and character of Theodosius in the following report:

▶ **Italy 391**

“Theodosius, born in Spain, the son of an army general, has needed all his military skills to defeat his rivals for the imperial purple and hold the splitting empire together. After killing usurpers and puppets, as he calls them, he has reunited the empires of east and west.”

Again it is clear that political motives were more important than what the Bible teaches, for this was supposed to be a Church Council. The book “The Medieval Church – a Brief History” also shows how the political desire for a united Church was more important than Bible teaching:

“Christianity is very prone to split over disputes concerning belief, organisation and discipline. Constantine and his successors discovered that religious unity was difficult to achieve. They were repeatedly drawn by personal conviction and by political necessity to try to preserve the unity of Catholic Christianity, especially when serious disputes broke out in the fourth and fifth centuries concerning the nature of Christ and the nature of the Trinity.”

From this you can see “personal conviction” and “political necessity” were indeed much more important than Bible teaching.

An interesting article appears on the Online *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. The

article is not easy to understand on first reading, so we have summarised below the message of one of the paragraphs:

- ⇒ *Christianity changed from a small group on the fringe of society into an institution that wanted to be accepted by everyone*
- ⇒ *As this change occurred, the belief that Jesus Christ was to return and set up a worldwide kingdom embarrassed church leaders*
- ⇒ *Almost every Christian writer in the first century believed in the second coming of Jesus Christ*
- ⇒ *When Christianity became the state religion the belief in the literal second coming of Jesus Christ was “pushed to the very margins of acceptable Christian thought”*

(The paragraph is reproduced at the end of this article, so you can read it in full.)

This indicates that the belief in the second coming of Jesus which is mentioned many many times in the Bible was removed from mainstream belief because the church wanted to be an acceptable institution in society.

This is yet one more occasion where Bible teaching has been ignored because of political considerations.

- ▶▶▶ *Politics influenced church beliefs in the early centuries of Christianity*
- ▶▶▶ *Political aims were more important than Bible truth*

The Church as a Political Force

“The Times Atlas of World History” makes it clear that the church soon became a political force. About the sixth century, it says:

“... when Rome succumbed to barbarian attack, the Church and its bishops, with their vast estates and pervasive influence ... guided Europe, as well as Christendom, into the new age.”

Pope Gregory VII in 1075 showed the political aims of the popes. “The Chronicle of the World” gives the following imaginary newspaper report:

▶ Rome April 1075

“Pope Gregory VII is making a strong bid to establish the primacy of the papacy and its authority over kings and princes as well as archbishops. Dictatus Papae (Sayings of the Pope) contains 27 short and pithy sentences which leave no doubt at all where the ultimate authority lies.

The assertions include “That he [the pope] alone may use the imperial insignia” and “That he may depose emperors, that he himself may be judged by no one”... Gregory sees the papacy primarily as a governmental institution which must be backed by laws.”

It is clear from these quotations that the church became a very powerful political force exerting its influence at the highest political levels. The result of this was that the church became involved in political disputes which often led to conflict and war. The principle of non-aggression that we considered at the start was not very much in evidence.



Vatican City – Home of the Popes

The Church Militant

A quotation from “World History” shows how the church exercised its political influence in promoting war:

“The Pope declared that Christian kings had a right to conquer heathen lands. Some Catholic friars and, later, Jesuits did identify with the cause of the native people, but even their mission stations were instruments of colonial control.”

The Crusades, which began in 1095, are a good example of the Church becoming involved in war. The Book “World History” tells us:

“In 1095 the Byzantine emperor appealed to the pope for assistance against the Turks. The pope answered the call by preaching a Holy War.”

The result was much bloodshed and suffering spread over many years. It further says that the Popes were little different from politicians. Talking of the fifteenth century we are told:

“... the pope ruled the Papal States as any other temporal monarch, and involved himself in the politics of the peninsula ... During this period the lifestyle of the popes was little different from that of any other monarch. They led troops into battle, promoted family interests, including those of their child-



Statue of Richard the Lionheart, an English king much involved in Crusades

ren, and built themselves enormous monuments.”

When the Protestant churches appeared in the sixteenth century, they became equally involved in politics and conflict. *“The Chronicle of the World”* has the following “report”:

▶ **Germany 1614**

“All Europe is holding its breath as the German princes – Catholics and Protestants alike – prepare for a war which threatens to engulf the whole continent.”

The war actually began in 1618 and resulted in 30 years of fighting between Catholics and Protestants. The decisions made by the church that caused the conflicts were political. The principle of showing love to all and of non-aggression that we considered earlier was obviously ignored.

Lawrence Cave

Summary

- ▶ Politics have been a big influence in the development of Christianity
- ▶ Political motives were more important than Bible truth
- ▶ The principle of non-aggression taught by Jesus Christ was ignored
- ▶ The suffering caused by Christianity cannot be blamed on the Bible

Appendix

Extract from Encyclopaedia Britannica Online, page reference:

<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-235307>.

As Christianity evolved from a charismatic cult on the fringes of society into an institution eager to live in harmony with that society, the hopes of apocalyptic millenarianism embarrassed church leaders, who emphasized that Jesus’ kingdom was “not of this world.” Whereas almost every prominent Christian writer of the 1st century posited a literal millennialism, by late in the 2nd century ecclesiastical writers had begun an assault on millenarian texts (especially the Revelation to John, the only New Testament text to explicitly address an earthly kingdom). Origen, an early 3rd-century theologian, argued that the millennium should be interpreted allegorically; others attempted to eliminate Revelation from the canon altogether (the Eastern church succeeded). When Christianity became the official state religion, millenarianism was pushed to the very margins of acceptable Christian thought.

Foundation Principles in Genesis

The Creation of Man

*The Genesis account is carefully structured to show that step-by-step everything was building up towards the Creation of man and woman. God formed the earth to be inhabited by people who would give Him glory and that intention was shown right at the beginning of the Bible, as **Dudley Fifield** explains.*

“Let us make man...”

❶ When looking at the words of Genesis One, we saw that God made mankind different from the animals and gave them a very important commission:

“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).

If you are puzzled by the use of the word “our” in this verse and wonder how it fits in with the stress placed upon the uniqueness and unity of the God of the Bible, there is a clear answer once you ask one simple question: “To whom was God speaking?” The Bible makes it clear that God was speaking to the angels:

The Book of Job tells us that when God “laid the foundations of the earth” it was a time when “the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy” (Job 38:4,7).

The word in Genesis One which is translated “God” is the Hebrew word “Elohim” which is plural in form although

used in a singular sense. Elsewhere in Scripture this word clearly refers to the angels. For example: thinking about the greatness of God the Psalmist says: “Let all be put to shame who serve carved images, who boast of idols. Worship him, all you gods” (Psalm 97:7) and when that last sentence is quoted in the New Testament, the Hebrews word is translated into Greek and reads: “Let all the angels of God worship him” (Hebrews 1:6), in a context that is all about the angels of God.

So it was the angels whom God commanded to make man in their likeness, that they might take control of God’s new-made world.

Out of Dust

❷ The actual creation of man is described in Genesis 2 in these terms:

“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).

The Hebrew word translated “formed” conveys the idea of something which has been ‘moulded’ and is linked with the work of the potter, so we can easily discern the



process of creation which is being described. Having formed man from the dust, Adam's body would have been lifeless or inanimate: still lacking that vital energy that we call life. So God *"breathed into his nostrils" the breath of life*".

The Hebrew words *'neshamah chayim'* mean literally *'breath of lives'*, and it is important to note that this is precisely the same energizing force that gives life to the beasts of the field. We read that at the time of the Flood:

"All flesh died that moved on the earth: birds and cattle and beasts and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth, and every man. All in whose nostrils was the breath of the spirit of life, (neshamah chayim) all that was on the dry land, died" (Genesis 7:21,22).

The result of God breathing life into the man was that he became *"a living being"* (Heb. *Nephash chayim*).

Sometimes translated as *"a living soul"*, the words mean simply *'a breathing creature'*. The same phrase is used of the constitution of the animal creation, for they too are described as *"living creatures"* (1:20, 24 and 2:19).

"Creature" not "Soul"

In their natural constitution there is no difference between man and the animal creation. It is a mistake to imagine that the word *'soul'*, used in the English translation concerning the creation of man, conveys an idea of some superior quality which was bestowed upon man. If you are in any doubt about this, note that the words

'immortal soul' do not occur in the pages of the Bible.

That phrase belongs to pagan teaching, not to Bible truth. What the Bible teaches is that God made man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and when he dies that breath of life leaves him and he returns to dust. And just as animals share the same breath of life, their death is along exactly the same lines. When they breathe their last, they die.

Scripture confirms this foundation principle found in the record of creation:



"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" (Ecclesiastes 3:19);

"Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it" (12:7).

Notice in this last quotation that the process of death is the precise reversal of the order of creation. Just as Adam had no conscious existence before life was breathed into him; so, when it is taken away, man is rendered lifeless, inanimate, without conscious existence. The Bible makes this very clear when it speaks of the death state:

"For in death there is no remembrance of you; in the grave who will give you thanks?" (Psalm 6:5);

"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). (See also Ecclesiastes 9:5,6; 9:10; Isaiah 38:18,19.)

Made in God's Image

③ Although sharing the same natural body as the animal creation, man is different, for he alone is made in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26).

Strong's Bible Concordance tells us this about the two words in question:

⇒ **"Image"** = a resemblance hence a representative figure.

⇒ **"Likeness"** = resemblance, shape, model like.

The first word seems to indicate a mental capacity – an ability to worship God; to understand spiritual concepts that animals do not possess. As a representative figure, Adam was given the ability to develop the moral characteristics of God: to show forth His glory.

The second word appears to have more to do with a physical likeness and if this seems at first a difficult concept to understand, remember that we are made in the likeness of the

angels (see note above), and they were almost invariably seen in the form of men.

Life After Death

④ The Bible teaching concerning life and death that we have examined helps us to understand about life after death. Consistently the Bible tells us that the only hope of surviving death is by resurrection from the dead (see Daniel 12:2; John 5:28,29; 1 Corinthians 15:12-18, 51-58 and 1 Thessalonians 4:16).

Note that in the New Testament those who have died in the Lord Jesus Christ are spoken of as being 'asleep'. This is a wonderful figure, for whilst it explains the unconscious state of the dead, it also keeps open the prospect of their awakening from the sleep of death when Jesus comes again to raise them and, if they are found faithful, to give them the gift of eternal life. (See John 11:11-14; 1 Corinthians 15:20; 1 Thessalonians 4:14-16 and 1 Thessalonians 5:8 & 9.)

Dudley Fifield

Judgement to Come

This report, commissioned by the Anglican Church contains this helpful Biblical conclusion about the true nature of death:

"Judgement is no superstition or fiction. It is a tremendous and solemn truth. Ultimately all that is found valueless in God's sight must and will be abolished, that that which He can use may be set free, and *"God may be all in all."*

Revelation and reason alike point to this inevitable consummation. The idea of the inherent indestructibility of the human soul (or consciousness) owes its origin to Greek, not to Bible, sources. The central theme of the New Testament is eternal life, not for anybody and everybody, but for believers in Christ as risen from the dead.

The choice is set before man here and now."



Earthquake! Tsunami! Volcano!



Things happen every day which result in disaster, suffering and the death of many people. Such events are part and parcel of the world in which we live.

They feature in news bulletins and newspapers and they are most disturbing when we catch a glimpse of what this means in the lives of ordinary people, just like us. Yet, for the most part, we have to admit we manage to dismiss these things from our minds – until we are personally affected.

Who's to Blame?

When we are forced to think about such horrors, the question that many people ask is "If God is a God of love, why does He allow such things?" Even people who don't believe in God ask that question, only to reinforce their belief that He isn't there at all.

Here's a different question to think about as a means of answering the first one. "How did Jesus deal with these things; and how did he view his own unwarranted suffering at the hands of wicked men?"

He saw a lot of personal suffering during his lifetime. It was a time when ordinary people found it difficult to provide for the basic necessities of life, for theirs was a nation under occupation by the Romans. It was also a time when medical care and treatment was very basic. There were illnesses that were incurable and for which there was no effective treatment, and disasters occurred, natural ones like

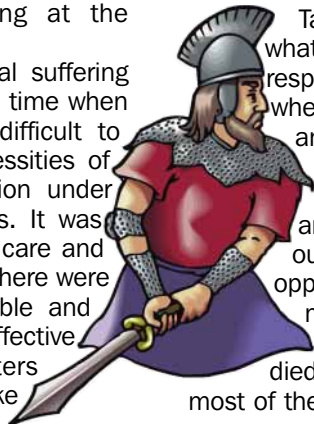
storms at sea, and ones resulting from human actions.

Repent or Perish!

Jesus was once told about some 'Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.' That sounds like religious persecution. The Roman governor had violently interrupted the worship of a group of people from the north of the country and there was carnage right in the Temple area. We are not told what triggered the Roman action, but it happened and almost certainly should not have! Surely we would be right to be disgusted and indignant. Did the Galileans somehow deserve it? What would Jesus say? He gave a most remarkable assessment, for Jesus said:

"Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:2,3).

Take a minute to ponder just what Jesus was teaching by this response. He was saying that when such a disaster happens, and we survive it, we should be thinking along the lines that God has given us another opportunity to get our lives right with Him. That opportunity will have been dramatically removed from those who suffered and died. but we should make the most of the fact that we were spared.



Fatal Accidents

Something else had happened about that time, this time as a result of a building collapsing and killing people and Jesus took that as another example which reinforced the lesson he was teaching. Did his hearers think it was an act of God that had singled out and killed those people?

“Those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that 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).

We are not told why they died, we are simply given the death toll, but Jesus says that in such circumstances we should look to ourselves. It is no time for misplaced sympathy or bitterness. We should be thankful we are alive and should use the opportunity to repent and to change our lives dramatically. We shouldn't think about what is happening to other people; for we can do nothing about that. But we should think about our own lives and make sure that what we do is acceptable before God.

God of Love

There are certain implications in such statements for us beyond what we have already stated.

➔ God is a God of love and is not willing that any should perish, but the uncertainties and dangers of life are such that we should

remember our need of repentance. For, as the apostle Peter said:

“The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

➔ The need for repentance implies that there is something wrong with our lives as they are.

Repentance means an about turn, a complete change of life. It is the sergeant's command to the column of soldiers: *“About Turn!”* It must be obeyed. It must be done.

If we do nothing we might perish. Sadly, that is what happens to most people at death: they die with no hope of an after-life at all. The Psalmist tells us that a man who dies without understanding God's purpose is like the beasts that perish (Psalm 49:20). To die without the hope that God

offers us is too dreadful to contemplate, but most people seem to live with a blind assumption that there is another and better life after this one, regardless of what they now believe and how they behave. Such people are sadly mistaken for Jesus once explained that every bit of human consciousness can be obliterated at death:

“And I say to you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will show you whom you should fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes, I say to you, fear him!” (Luke 12:4,5).



Hell Fire

The word translated “hell” is the Greek word “Gehenna”. That was a place name for an area just outside Jerusalem. It was the city dump where fires continuously burned the rubbish and anything else that was dumped there, including the bodies of criminals and others who had no proper burial – what an ignominious death! Jesus says that while humans have the power to kill us, God alone has the power to destroy us absolutely. He can, if He so chooses, terminate our lives and then, as it were, commit us to the rubbish tip; He can erase any lingering memory of us so that we have no part in the new life that will begin when Jesus returns from heaven.

It may come as something of a surprise to find that “heaven” is not a place where people go automatically after death. Jesus is teaching that we are all perishable goods and that every bit of us will perish if that is what God determines. We do not have an immortal spark inside us, something which lives on in eternal bliss, or which is tortured forever in endless agony. God holds the issues of life and death in His hands and that is a reality that we have to face up to, like it or not.

God Cares for Us

It would be frightening if God was someone who took random and poorly thought out decisions about our future. But He is not: He cares for those people who care about Him, as Jesus said:

“Are not five sparrows sold for two copper coins? And not one of them is forgotten before God ... Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows” (Luke 12:6,7).

Because God cares for us and wants

us to be saved from sin, it is vital that we take note of what Jesus says and repent of our sin, by turning away from human thinking and turning towards what God has revealed. In this, as in everything else, we must hear the Master’s Voice. But there is something else that we must do, something that Jesus also did when he was beginning his ministry. He went to John the Baptist and asked to be baptized, by being immersed in water, and before John did that Jesus made it clear that he was doing it as an example for all of us. This is what he said:

“Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15).

That was an act designed to show how we can put our lives right with God, by Belief, Repentance and Baptism. For, at the end of his life on earth, the Risen Lord gave this instruction to his disciples:

“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19,20).

This is meant to be a real challenge for every one of us! But it is also an assurance that if we live our lives courageously God will never forget us. Even if we sleep in death, we will be raised from that sleep at the Coming of Jesus. There is one abiding truth we should never forget:

“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).

David Nightingale

Take A Leaf...

As the days lengthen and the sun begins to climb higher in the sky we know spring is on the way.

When, as it seems, the countryside has lain dead all winter, now life begins to stir at this beautiful time of the year. Vegetation arises out of the sleep of winter to renew the face of the earth.

Cycle of Life

We can take the coming and going of the seasons as a matter of fact. It always happens. Spring, summer, autumn and then winter: the cycle continues year after year, apparently ad infinitum. "It's the course of nature", we might say. So we can take it all for granted: that it will always happen without interruption. But should we? Just stop for a moment and think about a leaf – the first leaf we see breaking forth from its bud. Stop and consider: "How?" and "Why?"

Since the days of Charles Darwin and his opus magnum "*The Origin of Species*" it has been, and still is, considered rational thinking to believe that everything we see around us has evolved over millions of years and is the result of natural selection and random chance. But is that true? Is it scientific and rational to believe that this is how the world began and survives? Or is there an alternative explanation that we should all consider?

Examine the Leaf

Take that leaf in your hand and, if you have a hand lens with you, so much the better, so you can see more clearly the unique features of the leaf you are holding. First, look at the two sides of the leaf the upper and the lower. Look at the different characteristics.

⇒ *Is the upper part of the leaf more shiny or glossy than the lower?*

⇒ *Does the lower part have a different texture from the upper?*

⇒ *Can you see the midrib and the veins?*

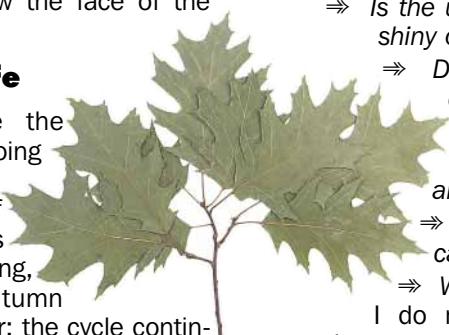
⇒ *Does your leaf have hairs, called trichomes?*

⇒ *What shape is your leaf?*

I do not know the answers to those questions because I do not know which leaf you have chosen amongst the thousands available from the remarkable bio-diversity of plants. But I can be certain the colour will be green, if it is a new leaf picked from a living tree. Why green, what is so special? Well we all know the answer, because leaves contain chlorophyll.

Photosynthesis

Think about chlorophyll: why is it in every leaf? Well botanists and biologists inform us that without chlorophyll the leaf would not live; neither would the tree, because it is the essential substance involved in the complex chemical activity called photosynthesis. All these are irrefutable facts we learned in our first biology lessons at school. But did we ask then, and do we ask now, "How did it all come about?"



If Charles Darwin is correct, then the leaf you are holding came about by chance. There was no designer: the leaves of the trees just happened albeit, he would probably add, over millions of years. Is this a reasonable and rational explanation? For example, a gardener will take great care to make sure that his or her freshly planted vegetables are not eaten by garden slugs or snails. He will know full well that if the leaves are eaten the plant will die.

New Life?

You might say *“No problem; if you wait long enough a new plant will evolve to take its place”*; but I do not think this would be the advice given by Matthew Biggs, or by any other well-known gardener or gardening book writer. In the wider context, conservationists are passionate about protecting wild plants and habitats, as there is an increasing concern about the destruction of the rain forests of the world which is depleting the Earth of thousands of species and destroying the bio-diversity of the planet. They are not willing to say: *“No problem: if we leave it long enough something else will grow”*.

They know the obvious truth: that once a plant or animal becomes extinct it will never return. No thinking person declares that there is no problem. Other species will soon evolve to take the place of plants and animals made extinct. Where is the Dodo? Where is its replacement? But Mr Darwin’s theory insists this is exactly how it happened in the beginning, there were no plants, in fact there was nothing; yet, he says, from nothing everything has come. This theory when considered thoughtfully fails to measure up and stretches my credulity too far.

Creation

The alternative position is that there is only one other explanation for the existence of plants, or any other form of life. They came about by specific creation: the world is the product of an all-powerful self-existent being we call “God”. I further believe that the Bible is the only reliable source whereby we can learn about God and His creative power and purpose with the Earth.

This is what it says:

“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).

Taking that leaf should have stimulated you to think seriously. If you asked yourself the question “How did this leaf come about?” you have only to examine it carefully to find the answer. Look at it through a microscope and you can see an intricate structure of cells that make up the leaf.

As the leaf breathes, it takes in the carbon dioxide that is breathed out by all animals; recycles the gas using the carbon for itself, and passes back into the atmosphere the life-giving oxygen so that we can live. It is an important part of a self-sustaining cycle of life which is so evidently created and made by a Master Designer. Yet this leaf is just one aspect of the beautiful balance of nature, which is better described as an expression of the majesty and glory of God.

Take a leaf. Hold it, and ask yourself, *“Did this happen by chance, or was it created by God?”*

V D Perfitt

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Stanley Owen

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