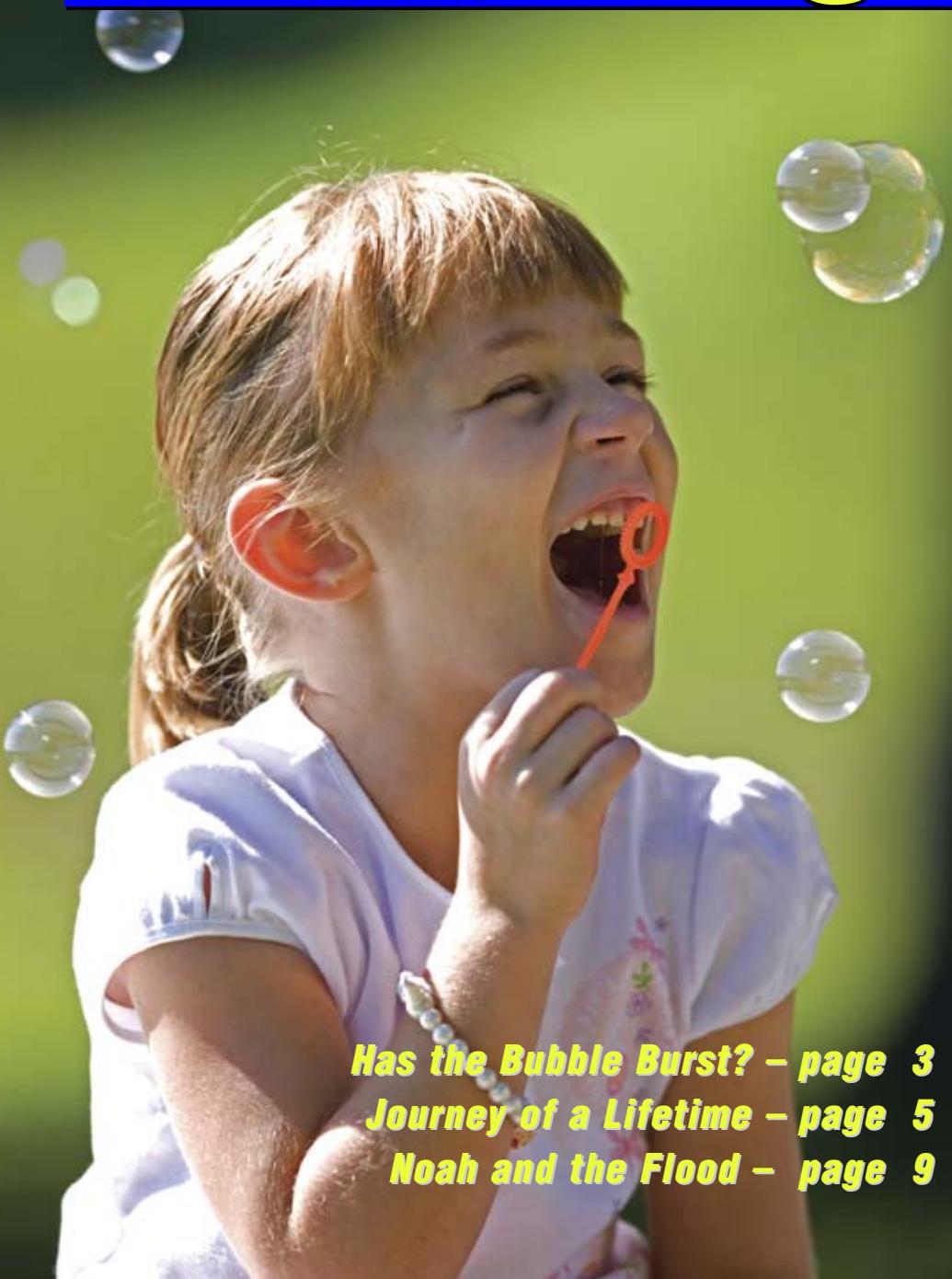


GladTidings

OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

1495



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Has the Bubble Burst?

Everything had seemed so secure and prosperous all over the developed world. Credit was easy; house prices were rising; people felt financially secure and able to spend freely; producers and retailers benefited from the spending spree, so everybody was happy.

The banks were making huge profits; companies were thriving; optimism was high – and now look what has happened! Has the bubble burst? Is this the beginning of the end of financial security, as institutions go to the wall, people lose their jobs, and then their houses, confidence plunges, and everyone gets really miserable and thoroughly depressed? How things can change in just a short time.

Fragility

This is a good time – when things are hard, and people are concerned about their lifestyle – to pause for a moment or two and reflect about life. A girl blowing bubbles has a great time for a short while. If the sun bounces off them, the bubbles can be multi-coloured; if the wind catches them they can soar up into the sky; if she applies just the right amount of breath they can stream out of the holder.

But you don't expect the bubbles to last any length of time – they can't. In the nature of things, bubbles must self-destruct: that's in their nature.



And, as things are now, that is also true of our existence. We are made to last just a little while, before we too are finished. One minute we may be hale and hearty; the next minute we could die. Life is that fragile, when you think about it.

Fragile Society

Human society is like that too. For all its appearance of stability and endurance, what has happened to the financial markets could equally happen to many other things. There was a time when each little community was self-supporting. They grew their own food, had their own energy supplies – fuel was gathered locally, or water or wind power was deployed, and they saw to their own administration.

Now everything is interconnected. We have come to rely hugely upon computerisation; oil and natural gas; air travel; the shipping of produce around the world and the sharing of information and finance. So when something happens in one part of the world, everyone knows about it and we are all likely to be affected by it, sooner or later. 21st

Century society is like a house of cards. It looks good while it is being built – higher and higher – but a puff of wind, or an over-ambitious building programme, and the whole thing can topple over and end up lying in pieces.

Rock Solid

Two thousand five hundred years ago a young prophet was given a remarkable insight into the way that human history would work out. His name was Daniel and this teenager was able to interpret the dream of a king who then ruled over the ancient kingdom of Babylon. You can read the entire episode in Daniel chapter two, and it makes fascinating reading, for God revealed through Daniel that human empires would come and go – four great empires in all – until at last there was no single ruling power, but lots of different powers, some as strong as iron and some as weak as clay. Unlike one another, they would not stick together but were always in danger of fragmenting, with dire consequences for humanity. Then the prophet saw the final dramatic event, which marked the start of a new phase in the history of the world.

He saw a stone which had not been chiselled out or shaped in any way, but which was in its raw natural state, and that landed right on the mix of kingdoms – weak and strong alike – and smashed them to pieces. It then ground them to powder and the wind arose and blew all the vestiges of human power and ability away, leaving just the stone. As he watched, he saw the stone grow into a mountain that filled the earth. So, in the place of human activity and man-made society, a new dynasty was established – one which had come from heaven. Here is the explanation in the prophet's own words:

"In the days of these kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and

consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever. Inasmuch as you saw that the stone was cut out of the mountain without hands, and that it broke in pieces the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold – the great God has made known to the king what will come to pass after this. The dream is certain, and its interpretation is sure" (Daniel 2:44,45).

King and Kingdom

God is to establish a kingdom upon the earth which will replace all forms of human administration. The rulership of God will be established when Jesus Christ returns to earth from heaven to rule from Jerusalem over the Kingdom of God. He is the long-promised King who can transform the world and save us from ourselves and what he will establish will be enduring and abiding. When God's kingdom comes it is to last and last, and it will herald a far better time for humanity than anything that has yet been experienced.

When everything is "doom and gloom", and nobody has any good news to share, we do well to remember that the promise of the angels still stands. What they told the shepherds, so they could pass it on, was a message of great joy and gladness. A child had been born in Bethlehem – who is now fully grown – who could and can change everything for the better. No wonder they said:

"Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord ... Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men!" (Luke 2:10-14).

Editor

Journey of a Lifetime

Christmas is one time of the year when people might attend something religious, even if it is only a nativity play at the local school, to see their children or grandchildren perform.

The apostle Paul explains (in Colossians 2:16) that believers have no need to observe certain days as holy days and it is most unlikely that Jesus was born on December 25th. But, as **David Pearce** explains, there are real benefits to be gained from thinking about the circumstances attending the birth of Jesus.

Nativity Celebrations

There is always a certain thrill about being reminded at Christmas that the King of kings was born, not in a royal palace, but in a humble stable. When we see little children at school acting out the scene at the inn, with the shepherds bringing their lambs to see the newborn baby, it makes us realise how great God is. He chose humble circumstances for the birth of His Son, rather than have him born among the mighty and the proud.

Invariably, there will be three kings turning up at the stable to offer their gifts brought from afar. But there were not necessarily three of them – it only says they brought three presents. Nor are they called kings, but ‘magi’ or wise men. And they certainly did not arrive at the stable on the day Jesus was born. It says in Matthew 2:11 that they came to a ‘house’, not a stable, and Jesus is described as ‘a young child’ at the time, not an infant. When we remember Herod decided to kill all the young children in Bethlehem under two years old, “according to the time which he had diligently enquired of the wise men”, it is likely that Jesus was much more than a babe in arms when his important guests arrived.



Let's not be too fussy about the details. What matters is the question – what were these three travellers doing so far from home? And what meaning is there behind the gifts they brought?

We are told in Matthew 2:1 that they came from the East, and that they were keen astronomers – they had noticed the appearance of a new star. Also, they saw this event as a sign that something important had happened.

On a map of the Middle East, if you draw a line eastwards from Jerusalem you end up in Babylon, which was a great centre for astronomy. And the Babylonians were also pre-occupied with foretelling the future. But why should the Babylonians have been expecting the birth of a new king in Israel? After all, the Jews had not had a king for over 500 years.

Seventy Weeks

Who might have warned the Babylonians that one day a new king would be born to Israel? There was a very important Jewish prophet who lived in Babylon about 530 B.C. named Daniel. For many years he was a trusted administrator in Babylon and before he died he left behind scrolls, which contained some remarkable prophecies. The one we need to look at is in Daniel 9:25.

The prophet foretold that a decree would be made to reconstruct the walls of Jerusalem, and after that decree a total of 69 ‘weeks’ (the Hebrew word means ‘sevens’) would pass until the death of ‘Messiah the Prince’. Who was the Messiah? The Messiah was a legendary character who was to sit on the vacant throne of King David and bring salvation to his people. Here is a typical prophecy from Isaiah:

“For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder. And his name will be called Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David and over his kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgment and justice from that time forward, even forever”
(Isaiah 9:6,7).

From When to When?

When did Daniel’s time period begin? There were several decrees by Persian kings to restore the ruins of Jerusalem, but if we take the one by Artaxerxes dated around 444 BC, and add on 69 ‘sevens’ of years, i.e. 483, we run out in the lifetime of Jesus. Quite possibly the Babylonian magi had other writings of the Jews in their libraries. In this case they could have come across a prophecy that said:

“A star shall come out of Jacob; a sceptre shall rise out of Israel”
(Numbers 24:17).

The reference to a sceptre gives a strong hint that the star of Jacob (Israel) would be a king, for it is kings who hold sceptres. So, putting it all together, we can imagine the following scene:

Journey of a Lifetime

An old man peers into the sky from the rooftop observatory of an ancient university. His eyes, screwed up against the wind, roam effortlessly over the myriad of familiar constellations. Suddenly there is a loud cry, and he hastens down the stairs to summon his friends. ‘Quick’, he says, ‘there is a new star over there in the West’. They crowd onto the platform and confirm the discovery. But what is the meaning of this event?

Days of intense study follow as they track down the prophets of the western lands in the royal libraries, and at last discover the writings of the Jews, once captive in Babylon. The first Jewish king for five centuries – their professional curiosity knows no bounds. Conferring, they agree they must make the heroic thousand mile (600 kilometre) journey to pay tribute to him, just as the prophet Isaiah had decreed (see Isaiah 60:3).

Weeks pass while they identify the meaning of the star, and more weeks follow as they prepare their mission and suitable gifts. Then there is the time taken for the journey (it took Ezra and his exiles 4 months to cover the distance – see Ezra 7:9). Now we can see why they did not arrive until Jesus was crawling.

But where would they find him? Logically, to find an infant king you would expect to go to the capital, and to the royal palace. But when the wise men arrived in Jerusalem and enquired of King Herod where his successor was to be found, they were met with scorn and suspicion. No one had heard of a baby king, and Herod, who was not even a Jew and had several sons already, had no time for rivals to the throne. He ordered the Jewish scribes

to look up the place where the next Jewish king would be born. Amazingly, there was just such a prophecy, clear as crystal:

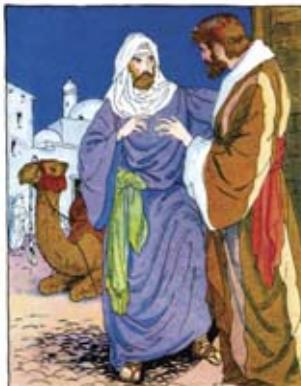
Journey to Bethlehem

"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to me the One to be ruler in Israel" (Micah 5:2).

Bethlehem was a tiny village only 12 miles (7 kilometres) from Jerusalem, and the birthplace of David, Israel's greatest king. To the enormous joy of the travellers, the star which they had first seen months before at home now appeared again, and guided them in the direction of the humble birthplace of the Messiah. We can imagine the villagers crowding round as these wealthy foreigners with their dusty camels enquired about a baby born months ago, about whom there might have been some unusual incidents that could mark him out as a king.

There would be plenty of people who would remember that remarkable night when the shepherds came to visit and who could direct the visitors to the house where Mary and Joseph had settled, fearful to return to the sharp tongues and gossip of Nazareth.

Mary's mouth must have dropped open when she saw the crowd standing outside in the street. Politely, they ask to see her little child. She invites them inside. Prostrating themselves low before the Son of God, they bring



from their saddlebags the treasures they have carried so far – gifts fit for a king. One by one they place at his feet three caskets, with greater riches than poor Mary had ever seen in her life – gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Gold

Gold was an obvious choice. An international currency through the ages, rare, beautiful, indestructible, and easily exchanged for goods or services, it was perfect for a king. Jesus' ancestor Solomon had received gold as tribute from his royal visitor, 1000 years before (see 2 Chronicles 9:9).

What about the spices, frankincense and myrrh? It is worth noting that when the Queen of Sheba came to see Solomon, she also brought spices. They were expensive, and greatly prized in ancient times. Both have a pleasant perfume, and are used in medicines and for embalming the dead. Vast quantities were used in Egypt to bind up the mummies in the tombs. And both spices come from the gum of trees found in Oman, India, Ethiopia and Somalia.

Frankincense

Frankincense, which literally means 'true incense', comes from a leafy tree. The trunk is incised with a knife, and a groove cut across at an angle below the first cut. The gum from the wound slowly trickles into the groove, solidifying into a hard lump shaped like a teardrop. When dry, this is pounded in a mortar until it becomes a powder, which is used as a base for incense. It burns slowly with a sweet smell, refreshing and calming at the same

time. It can be found in the book of Exodus as a major ingredient in the holy perfume used in the tabernacle (Exodus 30:34-36). It was also sprinkled and burnt with every sacrifice (e.g. Leviticus 2:1).

Myrrh

Myrrh comes from a thorny bush and keeps its aroma for centuries, and was a favourite perfume (see Song of Solomon 1:13). Because it is a powerful disinfectant, it was also used in embalming the dead. Its third property is useful even today – the anaesthetic power of tincture of myrrh can prove valuable as a paint-on treatment for painful mouth ulcers (you can buy it in a bottle from Chemists). That is why kind-hearted women in

Jerusalem offered it to criminals on the way to crucifixion, to dull their pain (Mark 15:23 – see too Psalm 69:21, where the bitterness of myrrh is likened to bile (gall), which is also a tongue-wrinkling astringent).

So the gifts were practical – easy to transport, unaffected by temperature and the passage of time, and concentrated value in a small space. Once sold or traded, they would have provided Joseph and Mary with money for months to come, including the long journey to Egypt and back. How often, to our surprise as much as to theirs, God provides for our daily bread in the most unexpected way. But there is more significance in these particular presents being given to the infant Jesus.

Prophetic Import

Born to be King, Jesus was worthy of



gold. But the spices, though valuable, had also a prophetic ring. Myrrh, as we have seen, was used to make the anointing oil used for priests and kings, and Jesus was to be both. But its bitterness spoke of his trial and crucifixion. Frankincense was burned on the incense altar morning and evening, and becomes a symbol for prayer, reminding us of Jesus as our intercessor and mediator. Its strong sweet perfume was an antidote to the sharp, offensive smell of corruption, which is why Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus brought sackfuls of it with which to bury Jesus. So, in symbol, his sweet act of self-sacrificing love will one day take away the corruption brought into the world by sin; and death itself will be swallowed up in victory.

The wise men returned, and they are not heard of again. They pass out of the story once they had seen the Lord's Christ. In that humble abode they had acted out in miniature a scene which will one day be repeated a thousand fold. For God has decreed that every knee will bow in tribute to his Son (see Philippians 2:9,10), and even kings from distant lands will come with their gifts (Psalm 72:10).

So, as we read and meditate again on the record of the birth of the Son of God, we can look forward to that happy day when the humble will be exalted, and many will join in the throng who pay tribute to the king who was born in a stable. If we want to be part of that happy crowd, we need to make the same journey of discovery for ourselves!

David M Pearce

Noah and the Flood

You would have thought that everyone knows the story of Noah and the flood, but that is not so. Now that religious education has become multi-cultural, at least in Britain, young people no longer get told about these ancient happenings. The account is to be found in the Book of Genesis, chapters 6 to 8, where we are told about a time when things went badly wrong in the world. The result was that God stepped in to make a new start by inviting Noah to build an ark and Noah in turn invited others to join him and his family. But nobody wanted to know, as **Dudley Fifield** now explains.

World Crisis

① In the first five verses of Genesis chapter 6 we have a description of the depths to which civilisation had sunk and, at first glance, it is difficult to know quite what the verses mean:

"The sons of God saw the daughters of men, that they were beautiful; and they took wives for themselves of all whom they chose" (Genesis 6:2).

Who were the sons of God and why was their action wrong?

② In the Book of Job (38:7) the phrase is used of angels, who were present at the creation of the world, and some have supposed that the reference here is to an illicit sexual union between the angels and the daughters of Adam. But we can be sure that is not the case, on the authority of no less a person than the Lord Jesus Christ. He once said about angels:

"The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage. But those who are counted worthy to attain that age, and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry nor are given in marriage; nor can they die anymore, for they are equal to the angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection" (Luke 20:34-36).



- ③ There are two possible ways of understanding the expression "sons of God" in Genesis 6.
 - ▶ In the New Testament, the title 'sons of God' refers to the status of those who have believed in the Lord Jesus Christ. You can see that phrase in the quotation from Luke 20 (above), or look it up in Matthew 5:9; Romans 8:14 or Galatians 3:26). So we may be reading about a time when those who had been living in a way that pleased God – who were trying to live like members of His family – abandoned their separate way of life and recklessly inter-married with the wicked, bringing about the virtual end of their line.
 - ▶ Another possibility is that "sons of God" would be better translated as "sons of the mighty". The Hebrew word Elohim which is usually translated "God" can sometimes convey that meaning. If it was the case here, the verse would mean that the sons of the mighty (i.e. men like Lamech) saw the daughters of Adam (the righteous line) and took them wives of all that they chose. They could have taken them by force of arms, for they had domination over the earth at that very violent time in the world's history.

The verse would then be telling us about the pride and arrogance of violent men who indulged themselves in every desire of their hearts.

- ④ Either way, the result of these unions was that:

"There were giants on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of men and they bore children to them" (Genesis 6:4).

The word translated ‘giants’ (Heb. *Nephilim*) does not necessarily mean that they were men of great stature, although it undoubtedly does have this sense on many occasions (e.g. Goliath). The Hebrew comes from a root ‘to fall upon’, so that the word can mean men of violence: warriors of a fierce and frightening disposition. That is probably what it means here for the verse continues “*Those were the mighty men who were of old, men of renown*”. The children that were born from these relationships became mighty men (Heb. *gibborim* = warriors, heroes), men of renown (lit. ‘men of name’). They were men of reputation, who stood out amongst their fellows.

This explanation is consistent with what we are told about the character of Lamech (in Genesis 4:19-24) and with the words that now follow:

"Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Genesis 6:5);

"The earth also was corrupt before God, and

the earth was filled with violence. So God looked upon the earth, and indeed it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth" (6:11,12).

Escape Plan

- ⑤ The outcome of this deteriorating situation was that God determined to destroy mankind and all living creatures from the face of the earth. The record then adds:

"But Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD" (Genesis 6:8).

God gave Noah instructions to build an ark to save his family and to perpetuate life upon the earth, for He would bring a flood of waters to destroy all in whose nostrils was the breath of life. Noah was given this invitation because he is described in these terms:

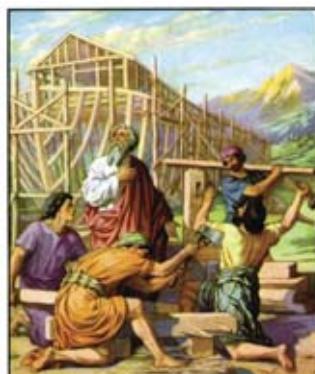
"Noah was a just man, perfect in his generations. Noah walked with God" (Genesis 6:9).

The New Testament enlarges our understanding, for it tells us:

"By faith Noah, being divinely warned of things not yet seen, moved with godly fear, prepared an ark for the saving of his household, by which he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness which is according to faith" (Hebrews 11:7).

"(God) did not spare the ancient world, but saved Noah, one of eight people, a preacher of righteousness, bringing in the flood on the world of the ungodly" (2 Peter 2:5).

It was a huge undertaking to build a vessel the



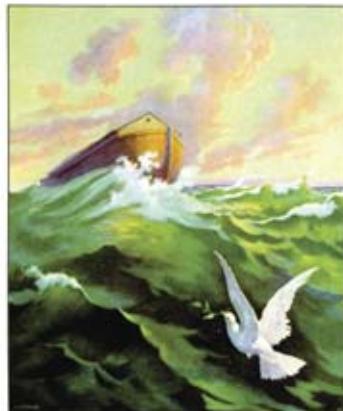
size of the ark, which had to contain not only Noah and his family (and any other people who might have responded to Noah's preaching) but also two of all animals and seven of some species (Genesis 7:1-3). But Noah obeyed God's commandments and did what was asked of him, so that both he and his household were saved. Everyone else perished, for only eight people were saved.

Lessons for Us

6 What are the lessons of the flood for us? Surely that God will not tolerate human wickedness indefinitely. There comes a time when there is no remedy and then God reveals Himself in judgement. It was because of this that the Lord Jesus linked the days of his second coming to the days of Noah:

"But as the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and did not know until the flood came and took them all away, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be" (Matthew 24:37-39).

It is a remarkable thing but although the world was full of violence and corruption, these were not the things that were emphasised by the Lord Jesus Christ. Instead it was the everyday things of life that men indulge in – eating, drinking and marrying. It was



not that there is anything wrong in those things, but that the people concerned were oblivious of the reality of their true standing in the sight of God. Like the fool, who said in his heart "*There is no God*" (Psalm 14:1), those who lived before the flood had completely forgotten God. They were obsessed with the material things of life to the exclusion of the things which really matter and, in their blissful ignorance, the flood came and took them all away.

7 "They did not know" (Matthew 24:39). Those are terrible words and a dreadful warning to us in the days in which we live. Noah was saved in the ark, or as the First Epistle of Peter puts it, he was "*saved through water*" (1 Peter 3:20), for it was as though Noah's old life had been destroyed by the flood and he started a completely new life when the waters receded.

Indeed the ark could be likened to a coffin; for it was 300 cubits long (150 yards) by 50 cubits broad (75 feet) by 30 cubits high (45 feet). It was a huge box-like structure, not at all like the depiction we sometimes see in children's books. So the apostle Peter writes:

"There is also an antitype which now saves us, namely baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 3:21).

Dudley Fifield

The Journey to Jerusalem

Paul was travelling with a company of people to Jerusalem, including the writer Luke. They were going with money which had been collected as a welfare fund for the poor Jewish believers in the city, but en route they had taken the opportunity to meet up with members of the congregation of Ephesus, at a town called Miletus. **John Hellawell** now traces the remainder of the trip.

From Miletus to Tyre

The farewells at Miletus must have been very sad, for Luke says that “after we had torn ourselves away from them” (NIV) they sailed from Miletus to Cos and then on to Rhodes and Patara. There they found a ship heading for Phoenicia. After sighting Cyprus, they sailed south of the island to Tyre where the ship unloaded its cargo.

It is probable that it was a substantial merchant vessel since small boats tended to hug the coastline. In Tyre they sought out and found the disciples there. This suggests that nobody in the party was familiar with the church which had probably been founded during the Phoenician mission of Acts 11:19. They stayed in Tyre for seven days while the cargo was unloaded and, perhaps, other goods were loaded. The ship was going on to Ptolomais and possibly Caesarea but having made good time Paul could afford to wait until it sailed again.

Problems Ahead

In Tyre the Holy Spirit continued to

declare, through the prophets, what Paul already knew regarding his fate in Jerusalem. In Acts 20:23 we read that Paul told the elders from Ephesus “the Holy Spirit testifies in every city, saying that chains and tribulations await me”. The disciples urged Paul not to go on. We should not assume that Paul’s decision to go on was against God’s will, for he believed that it was God’s will for him to make the journey (Acts 20:22). But it meant that he went ahead in the full knowledge that things were going to be difficult for him.

When it was time to travel on, the believers and their families went to the beach and knelt to pray. They said their farewells but this departure was not as emotional as that at Miletus because they were not as well known to each other. Even so, it is illustrative of the wonderful fellowship of the early church.

Their ship set sail from Tyre bound for Ptolomais (modern Acre) and here, once more, they met with the disciples



but this time only for a day. This ecclesia was probably formed at the same time as the one in Tyre, during the mission of Acts 11:19.

Arrival in Caesarea

Leaving the next day they travelled to Caesarea. The text may mean that they continued by ship or by road. At Caesarea they stayed with Philip the Evangelist, one of the Seven who were appointed to oversee the welfare arrangements for the widows (Acts 6:3-5) and who was last mentioned, in Acts 8:40, arriving at Caesarea. He had four unmarried daughters who were prophetesses. Although the record makes no mention of this it seems quite probable that they also informed Paul of the problems that he would encounter at Jerusalem. Other disciples who were residents of Caesarea included Cornelius and his family, the first Gentile converts (Acts 10:1,24,45; 11:1).

After a few days Agabus arrived from Judea. Earlier (see Acts 11:28) the same prophet had travelled from Jerusalem to Antioch and prophesied about the famine which occurred in the reign of the emperor Claudius. Now he prophesied again, symbolically taking Paul's girdle or belt and using it to tie his own hands and feet saying:

"Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man who owns this belt, and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles'" (Acts 21:11).

On hearing this, everyone pleaded with Paul not to go up to Jerusalem but Paul responded by saying:

"What do you mean by weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus" (21:13).

Paul would not be persuaded, so they concluded their discussion with the words, "*The Lord's will be done*".

There are parallels between the journeys to Jerusalem by Paul and that of the Lord Jesus. Both refused to be diverted from suffering and death by the pleas of well-meaning companions (e.g. Peter in Matthew 16:21-23). The Lord Jesus would not be deflected but "*steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem*" (Luke 9:51).

On to Jerusalem

After the period of several days mentioned in Acts 21:10, they got ready (that is, they packed their bags or they hired horses) and set off for Jerusalem. Some of the disciples from Caesarea went with them and brought them to the home of Mnason, a Cypriot and one of the first disciples. There is some doubt as to where Mnason's house was located. Some think that it may have been in Jerusalem but it seems more probable that it was in a village on the way from Caesarea. Paul would have many friends in Jerusalem with whom he could stay.

When they arrived in Jerusalem (this phrase seems to support the stay at an intervening village) they were received warmly by the disciples. So far there was no sign of the difficulty that had been foretold, but it was bound to come sooner or later, just as the prophets had said.

When we are faced with difficulties, perhaps because we have big decisions to take, do we approach matters with the same degree of courage and commitment? Paul had faith in God and was persuaded that He would help him. God is waiting to help us too, if we put our trust in Him.

John Hellawell

The Gospel of the Kingdom

*The Kingdom of God once existed on earth, when there were kings who reigned for God in Jerusalem, but it had long since ceased by the time of the birth of Jesus. However there were prophecies about a coming deliverer who would one day re-establish the kingdom and there were some people who had worked out that it was about time for something important to happen, as **Mark Sheppard** now explains.*

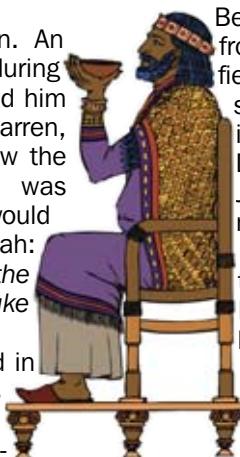
Something Happening?

Those who were expecting something important to happen were aware of Old Testament prophecies that foretold a coming King (like Ezekiel 21:27) and those which gave a time period for his appearance (notably Daniel 9:24-27, mentioned in an earlier article).

They felt that the time was ripe for some of these predictions to be fulfilled and they very much wanted a King of their own. For the nation of Israel had ceased to be a Kingdom for most of the last 600 years; instead it had been subject to other nations – Babylonians, Persians, Greeks and now Romans. There were puppet kings – members of the Herod family – but they were not even fully Jewish, but Idumeans.

Then things began to happen. An angel appeared to an old priest during his service in the Temple and told him that he and his wife, long barren, would have a son. This was how the birth of John the Baptist was announced. It was said that he would be a herald of the coming Messiah: “*He will also go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah*” (Luke 1:17).

As things turned out, he would in fact herald the appearance of his relative, the Lord Jesus. For the angel made a further appearance, about six months later.



Many foreigners had ruled over the Jews

This time it was to a young woman, a virgin, in the town of Nazareth, in Galilee, about 15 miles from the Sea of Galilee.

“The angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David. And he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end’” (Luke 1:30-33).

Special Child

The child born to Mary was uniquely the Son of Man and the Son of God.

Because Mary was descended from David he was also qualified to be the one who should sit on the throne of the LORD instead of his ancestor David. It would seem that Joseph, Mary’s husband, might well have been the rightful heir to David’s throne, had the Kingdom not been abolished in the time of King Zedekiah.

The birth of the Lord Jesus was in most humble circumstances, probably out in the open courtyard of the inn at Bethlehem, where

the animals would find their shelter. Not too long afterwards there were some special visitors.

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, ‘Where is he who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East and have come to worship him’ ... And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary his mother, and fell down and worshipped him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh” (Matthew 2:1-2,11).

Those gifts were prophetic of what lay ahead for the infant, and the roles he was destined to fulfil. Frankincense was for Jesus’ priestly role; Myrrh would be used to embalm his body as he lay in the tomb, and Gold was a fitting gift for a King.

We are told very little of the early life of the Lord Jesus. After he was born he was taken with Mary by Joseph into Egypt for safety, because of Herod’s anger at the possibility of a rival monarch. The family returned to live in Nazareth in Galilee where Jesus became a carpenter (Matthew 2:23; Mark 6:3). We have just the one incident recorded in the gospels about these silent years, when Jesus was in the Temple at Jerusalem, talking with the doctors of the law, and insisting that he must be in his Father’s house (Luke 2:49).



A time to change direction in life

Public Ministry

At the age of thirty Jesus appears to burst onto the public stage, with the message he would spend the next three years preaching. It was a message about the kingdom or rulership of God:

“Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel!” (Mark 1:14,15).

Mark crystallises his view of Jesus’ teaching in the way that he introduces him. Jesus’ message was essentially about the coming of the kingdom of God. His teaching has many other aspects, but they all look forward to the establishment of God’s kingdom on earth, a re-established kingdom of Israel, with Jerusalem as its capital city. Other gospel writers are equally forceful, like Matthew:

“Now Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease among the people” (Matthew 4:23).

This was what it was all about. Jesus’ message was that men and women should repent and believe the gospel. He was telling them that:

- ✓ the critical time has come;
- ✓ it is time for a change of direction in life;
- ✓ here is the opportunity to change to a life which is governed by faith.

When Mark records that Jesus

preached that the kingdom of God was at hand, he is writing as an easterner for Middle Eastern readers. He was not thinking like a westerner; nor was the Kingdom he had in mind the typical western idea of a kingdom with:

- ✓ a people and land,
- ✓ a legislative assembly, and
- ✓ a constitutional monarch providing a figurehead.

Instead his idea of a Kingdom would have been a government which is an extension of the kingly power which is embodied in its King. Mark was writing about a King who was issuing an invitation to repent and believe the gospel, if his hearers wanted to come under his rulership.

Divine Rulership

This makes sense of passages that would be difficult if it were otherwise. For example:

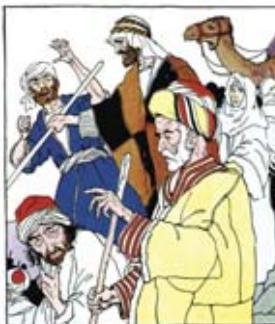
"Now when (Jesus) was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, he answered them and said, 'The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, "See here!" or "See there!" For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you'" (Luke 17:20,21).

Jesus was not talking about a kingdom in the heart, but was saying that the essentials of the kingdom were already there. The king was Jesus – there with all his kingly authority, even if the Pharisees did not acknowledge it; the disciples were the beginnings of the people of the king; the invitation was there for others to

join and share.

For his audience, the kingdom would come no nearer unless they did something about it. Yet there was the promise of a greater fulfilment for those who accepted his message: there will be a day when all the hopes and expectations of Israel will indeed be fulfilled. But it would be too late then. Jesus was saying, to his contemporaries – and it is equally true for us – that they had better listen to him while they had the opportunity. For, he said:

"The days will come when you will desire to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it. And they will say to you, 'Look here!' or 'Look there!' Do not go after them or follow them. For as the lightning that flashes out of one part under heaven shines to the other part under heaven, so also the Son of Man will be in his day. But first he must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation" (Luke 17:22-25).



Jesus was using the opportunity to remind his disciples and the others who heard that he had to suffer on the cross and then ascend to be with his Father before any of this could happen. The good news of the Kingdom had come already for those who heard him, but others – through the next two thousand years – would also have the opportunity to hear and respond before the promises of the Kingdom were fulfilled. That opportunity has now come to us and we should make full use of it if we want to be part of God's Kingdom people.

Mark Sheppard

Can Christians Speak with Tongues?

For some people, speaking ecstatically is a hallmark of their conversion. For them, it is the way in which they feel convinced that they have really been born again. But is their experience the same as that which happened in the First Century? And should Christians expect to be able to speak with tongues in this 21st Century? That is the investigation

David Willey now undertakes.

Definitions

The answer to the question posed by this article depends first of all on what we understand by the phrase, 'speaking with tongues'.

We could spend a great deal of time looking at what people in the 21st Century believe it means in various religious groups. But we have invariably found in this magazine that the safest course is to go straight to the Bible and find out exactly what it teaches concerning this gift of the Holy Spirit, the 'speaking with tongues' that is mentioned throughout the New Testament. For the Bible is the Word of God and we can be sure that God would not be the author of confusion or misunderstanding on this or any other subject.

Old Testament

Did you know that the practice of 'speaking with tongues' is not mentioned in the Old Testament? It is not even mentioned in the prophecy of Joel (he was the prophet who foretold the pouring out of the Spirit of God in New Testament times). None of the founding fathers like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David or the prophets of old could speak with tongues, so we can discover immediately that it is not essential for salvation. For we know

they will be in the Kingdom of God because of what Jesus said to the disciples:

"There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and yourselves thrust out" (Luke 13:28).

Notice that all these people will be in the Kingdom of God. Being in the Kingdom is not dependant upon 'speaking with tongues'.

New Testament

Even more importantly, there is no mention of Jesus ever speaking with tongues. It is just not there in the gospels! On no occasion is he ever described as speaking with tongues – and yet other churches would say that the gift is a vital way for a Christian to communicate with God. Jesus spoke directly to God in prayer and we, today, have the same facility – we also can talk to God in prayer in whatever language we are able to speak. So immediately we can see that those who would say that we cannot be saved unless we can speak with tongues have some pretty difficult questions to answer.

So where did the practice come from and what did it achieve? We accept emphatically that Jesus promised the

apostles that they would be imbued with the power of the Holy Spirit when he had ascended to heaven. For example, he promised the disciples:

"The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you" (John 14:26).

Accurate Recall

Notice that in this verse Jesus is speaking specifically to his disciples and to them he promised the Comforter or Helper – the gift of the Spirit – which the Bible tells us is the power of God. And notice what is promised in the verse: it is the ability to bring to mind accurately all that Jesus said. So when the apostles started recording in written form all that Jesus had said, they were able to do this accurately and truthfully. But nobody else can do that now. We remember what Jesus said because they wrote it down accurately and we can read it.

We can depend on the New Testament as an inspired account which contains the exact words of the Lord Jesus and the writings of Paul and others, precisely as they spoke or wrote them. And that matters because they spoke on behalf of the Lord God of Heaven. In other words, we can completely depend on the accuracy of the New Testament, indeed of the whole Bible, as the wholly inspired word of God because of that gift of the Holy Spirit.

Authenticating Signs

The gift was more than the ability to record the words of Jesus accurately. It also conferred the ability to perform miracles and to speak with tongues. Though Jesus himself did not speak

with tongues, he promised that this would be part of the power of the Spirit that would be given to the disciples. They were to be given signs that marked them out as the genuine apostles, as Jesus explained:

"These signs will follow those who believe: In my name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; they will take up serpents; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover ... And they went out and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the word through the accompanying signs" (Mark 16:17-18,20).

It would be interesting to look at each of these signs, but in this series we are examining the gift of 'speaking with tongues', and we notice that Jesus specifically says that the disciples would speak using new tongues. And that promise is referred to again in the Book of Acts, in these words:

"You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (1:8).

Notice again that the Holy Spirit is the same thing as the power of God, and it was to be part of the apostles' work to witness the truth of Jesus from within Israel right to the uttermost parts of the earth. In other words, they would be given the tools they needed to preach the gospel in many different lands, and one such Spirit-aided skill would be the gift of tongues.

David Willey
To be continued

Straight and Crooked

A motorway is much straighter than a country lane which could be described as crooked or twisty. But that's not the only way we use those adjectives. We also use the words to describe someone's way of life. We say that a reformed criminal is now "going straight", whereas a thief is described as a crook: someone who leads a crooked way of life.

Straight or Crooked?

Bible terminology is much the same. Speaking of the wickedness of the people of Israel, the prophet Isaiah says:

"Their feet run to evil, and they make haste to shed innocent blood ... The way of peace they have not known, and there is no justice in their ways; they have made themselves crooked paths" (Isaiah 59:7,8).

Evil men are described as those whose paths are crooked, perverse and dreadful:

"Those who leave the paths of uprightness to walk in the ways of darkness; who rejoice in doing evil, and delight in the perversity of the wicked; whose ways are crooked, and who are devious in their paths" (Proverbs 2:13-15).

Moses contrasts the ways of Israel with the ways of God, describing the first as "perverse and crooked" (Deuteronomy 32:5) and the ways of God as "just and right". That is a crucial distinction, for God always does

what is right and can never deviate or go astray from the right way:

"He is the Rock, his work is perfect; for all his ways are justice, a God of truth and without injustice; righteous and upright is he" (32:4).

Human Nature

The Bible is a collection of books that spans many hundreds of years, but it records no improvement by the time of the New Testament. In the first century things were no different, so the apostle Paul could exhort the Philippian believers:



"Become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation ... holding fast the word of life" (Philippians 2:15).

Try as we must to walk the straight and narrow way that leads to God's kingdom, it is a wonderful prospect that when Jesus returns to rule on earth, he will straighten things out. As the prophet Isaiah promised, when he predicted the coming of Jesus as King:

"Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low; the crooked places shall be made straight, and the rough places smooth; the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken" (Isaiah 40:4,5).

Marion Buckler

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