

Glad Tidings

OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

1504



Living in Harmony – page 3

There is an answer to Pain and Suffering – page 5

The Bible and Science – page 12

Glad Tidings

OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

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109

1504

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Living in Harmony

A wise man once said “*There is nothing new under the sun*”, and then went on to explain just what he meant, in these words. “*It has already been in ancient times before us. There is no remembrance of former things*” (Ecclesiastes 1:10,11).

Wind Power

So the present rush to make the most of wind power, for generating electricity is nothing new. The windmills of Holland, one of which is featured on the front cover, remind us of that. The technique has been tried and tested long ago, albeit on a smaller scale. Windmills and watermills were once vitally important for grinding corn to make flour, before they were replaced by steam-driven and then petrol-driven engines.

With energy sources running out and carbon emissions causing such concern, going back to wind power – for the production of electricity – is a sober reminder of how things are changing. Perhaps it is the case that the future lies behind us!

Walking Backwards

The ancient Greeks and the Mayan civilisation, among others, tended to view the past as the future and the future as the past. Their argument was that we know what happened in the past, but we cannot tell what lies ahead, so the one is certain and the other completely uncertain. The future

is constantly “sneaking up” on us, as if from behind, while we are able to scrutinize the past at our leisure.

Imagine you were walking backwards. To avoid stumbling, you would have to draw clues and inferences from the scenery that was receding before you. You would never see directly what was coming, but would

have to infer it. One writer put it this

way: “This model seems much closer to the realm of actual experience than ours, which has us facing a future that we somehow can't see, with our backs to a past that is plainly visible”.

Learning from the Past

If you turn that image around, there is clearly a danger that by looking forwards all the time we have turned our back on the past, which is now behind us. We can then easily forget what has happened and keep repeating the same mistakes over and over again. That's how many people choose to live, of course, always hoping that something better will happen “this time around”. But a wiser course of action would be to learn from the past and then find a better way of doing things.

Take the case of windmills and wind power. When they were used extensively in the past, that was a time when mankind worked in harmony with nature, using natural sources of energy – like wind and water – and there was then no question of pollution or environmental damage. It was also a time



when the pace of life was slower and when people lived closer together, and more communally, than they do nowadays. So the past has some important lessons to teach us, if we are willing to learn.

Written for Us!

The apostle Paul once appealed to his readers along similar lines, though not about windmills. He reminded some believers in Corinth, in ancient Greece, that God had once dealt very severely with the Israelites when they were travelling through the wilderness. They had lapsed into idolatry and immorality – something that was an ever-present danger for the Greeks in Corinth, a city which was notorious for its immorality. He was referring to events that happened nearly one thousand five hundred years before – I suppose we would call that ‘ancient history’. But notice what he said:

*“Now all these things happened to them as examples, and **they were written for our admonition**, on whom the ends of the ages have come. Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall” (1 Corinthians 10:11,12).*

The apostle Paul was remarkably forward-looking in the way he lived. There were things he had done in the past that he wanted to forget, and he lived in a way which was intended to make up for those past mistakes. He once summed up his spiritual philosophy in these words:

“One thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:13,14).

He was like a runner in a race – the race for life – who constantly pressed forward towards the winning post. But for all that energetic endeavour he was not unmindful of what lay behind and wanted to learn from the mistakes and experiences of others. His reminder to the Corinthians was that the Bible is crammed full of helpful examples and the life histories of people who have gone before along this very road. They can teach us a great deal, if we read and consider them.

Travelling Together

We are companions on the road through life, every one of us trying to find the right way forward.

- ❖ We must try to live in harmony with one another, because we all need help and encouragement, especially when things are difficult.
- ❖ We must try to live in harmony with our environment and thus appreciate the opportunities in life that God has given us.
- ❖ But most importantly we must learn to live in harmony with God, so that we might walk with Him through life and thus obtain the priceless gift of eternal life when Jesus returns.

If we are to do this successfully we must be in agreement with God’s values and familiar with His view of life. A prophet once issued this challenge: *“Can two walk together, unless they are agreed?” (Amos 3:3)*. The answer is clearly “No!” But the opportunity still exists for us to make an agreement with God and to learn to follow His direction through life. There is no better way.

Editor

There is an answer to Pain and Suffering

Today I sit in a hospital waiting room and see the constant flow of those who suffer and I ask myself, "Is there really an answer?", as we see a man passing by who is crippled with arthritis, and a child with a deformity that tears the heart. A lady said to me: "So much for your God of love!"

Is it really fair?

We are inclined to think that life is sometimes unfair for us, but turn the question around for a moment. In all reverence, is it really fair to blame God for things like this:

- ❖ Deaths from lung cancer due to smoking?
- ❖ Thousands of road deaths?
- ❖ An increasing number of sexually transmitted diseases, in direct violation of His laws for our well being?
- ❖ Diseases caused by bad housing, pollution, or impure water supplies?
- ❖ Concentration camps and gas chambers?

What sort of world do we really want? Should it be one in which God constantly intervenes to control and regulate things that could go wrong? Do we want Him to prevent all air crashes, car smashes and accidents of



all sorts? Should He stop the burglar in his tracks, prevent the rapist, and hold back the murderer's hand?

God-given Freedom

Much of the suffering we see today is due to man's inhumanity to man, or to his foolishness. Yet it would be a very different world if God intervened on every occasion to block a virus, to stop a crime, or to save us from our folly. We would be like robots or puppets, with no choice except to be manipulated by

our Creator. The remarkable fact is that God does not discriminate between the righteous and the wicked in general catastrophes, but such is His mercy that, as Jesus explained:

"He makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matthew 5:45).

God made everything very good in the beginning, but sin entered the world as man abused his God-given free will, and disobeyed the one commandment he had been given. The harmony that existed between Adam and God was broken, and the sorry consequences have been seen ever since. Was it sin that brought much of the suffering into the world? Without a doubt! Its impact was soon apparent as the length of time people lived steadily declined and their immunity to illness also decreased. Suffering and

loss has now become common to us all, but it remains the case that our God-given freedom can be used for good or ill. The apostle is emphatic when he states:

“Through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned” (Romans 5:12).

God’s Megaphone

What about pain? It can be a blessing in certain circumstances, surprising as that might seem. How would we know our teeth were decaying, for instance, if we didn’t get toothache? How would we know we had broken our arm, if it didn’t hurt so much? That’s why one writer called pain “God’s megaphone.”

But there are other ways in which we can become aware of God in our lives, if we only use them, without having to be stopped in our tracks by things that go wrong. Just stop and think about the gift of life and you will come to see His overriding majesty, and the fact that we cannot ask anything as a right from Him. Life itself is a gift that we should appreciate greatly.

How we react

Suffering can cause us to react in a number of ways. On the one hand it can bring us closer to God, and thus strengthen our character. The Bible often encourages us to use any misfortune that might befall us in that sort of positive way, including having compassion for others who are ill or suffer in any way:

“You have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons: ‘My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, nor be discouraged when you

are rebuked by him; for whom the Lord loves he chastens, and scourges every son whom he receives.’ If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons. Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live?” (Hebrews 12:5-9).

Contrary Effect

On the other hand, when things go wrong for us we can become resentful, and be filled with self pity. We cannot question God’s ways, for He knows best, but can we make sure that our responses are right in His eyes. If we do what He asks of us, He will assuredly bless us, but we need to remember that the blessing may not come in this life, but in the life to come. There are many examples provided for us in the Scriptures of people who had a tough time but who learned from their ordeal. God brought happiness to Job at the end of his dreadful suffering and he was certainly a better man after his trials. We too can react in the same way if we put our trust in God’s righteousness and His faithfulness. After much distress the Psalmist could say:

“Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; For I shall yet praise him, The help of my countenance and my God” (Psalm 42:11).

In the same way the apostle Paul exhorts us to continue believing and trusting in God whatever happens for,



he says, it is through much tribulation that we shall enter the Kingdom of God (Acts 14:22). And if we need any further assurance, remember that:

“God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).

Jesus Suffered Too

The suffering of the Lord Jesus must have caused grief in heaven, but it was for the greatest possible purpose. Such tremendous love states distinctly that God doesn't want anyone to die eternally. God allowed His Son to die so that we might have life. What greater love could there be? Our Saviour's suffering is brought out vividly in the words of Hebrews chapter 12, just before the writer explains that we too should take a positive view about our own experiences. This is what he says:

“Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider him who endured such hostility from sinners against himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls” (Hebrews 12:1-3).

With the superb example of Jesus before

us, we are called upon to make the best of any affliction, knowing that God is well aware of all we feel. Jesus endured because he was sure about the end result – that he would be raised from the dead by his Father and would be exalted to glory at His right hand. In the same way King David, after being brought very close to death, could say: “Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning” (Psalm 30:5).

A Better Tomorrow

What if we are told that we have a terminal illness? It isn't the end. The whole Christian ethic is that for the man or woman who has a solid faith in God's promises there is a future life. The apostle Paul once wrote these magnificent words:

“All things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28).

We are given a glimpse of the future in the beautiful 35th chapter of Isaiah's prophecy. If you're feeling down, read what the prophet said about a better time to come on earth when the Lord Jesus reigns from Jerusalem over God's worldwide kingdom. It will be a time of transformation and regeneration when:

“The eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb sing. For waters shall burst forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert. The parched ground shall become a pool, and the



thirsty land springs of water ... A highway shall be there, and a road, and it shall be called the Highway of Holiness. The unclean shall not pass over it, but it shall be for others ... the redeemed shall walk there, And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing, with everlasting joy on their heads. They shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away” (Isaiah 35:5-10).



When that new society is established the troubles of today will be no more. The nagging question, ‘Why should this happen to me?’ will have disappeared. Sorrow and sighing will be no more, and a new creation will be formed where the ills of this life will be banished. Each of us will be given a body like the Lord’s own glorious body. Delightfully, the apostle Peter simply calls it ‘times of refreshing’ (Acts 3:19). The happenings of this life are all known by God, and there will be a glorious conclusion. The call is, “Be faithful unto death and I will give you a crown of life” (Revelation 2:10).

God’s People

There are so many evil things in the world today which puzzle us, but God is not unmindful. Out of a world of suffering He is calling a people to bear His name. It is not easy to remember that when we are racked by pain, but God will not try us beyond our endurance. He wants us to read His Word and to believe in the great promises He has made. We show our obedience by

being baptised into the saving name of Jesus Christ and thus become members of His family, waiting for the coming of their Lord. That won’t mean we never suffer again, but it will mean that anything that happens is part of God’s plan for us.

Whatever our troubles we may even say with a hero of old, “It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I may learn your statutes” (Psalm 119:71). There are

many lessons to learn but, if we recover from our sicknesses, let us thank God for His mercy. He has provided men and women who have used their God-given intellect and through their dedication to medical science can bring cures and helps that are a blessing to all.

The inspired Psalmist had this conclusion and it is one we might all aim for:

“The LORD is righteous in all his ways, gracious in all his works. The LORD is near to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon him in truth. He will fulfill the desire of those who fear him; he also will hear their cry and save them. The LORD preserves all who love Him, but all the wicked he will destroy. My mouth shall speak the praise of the LORD, and all flesh shall bless His holy name for ever and ever” (Psalm 145:17-21).

Ken Clark

The Promised Seed

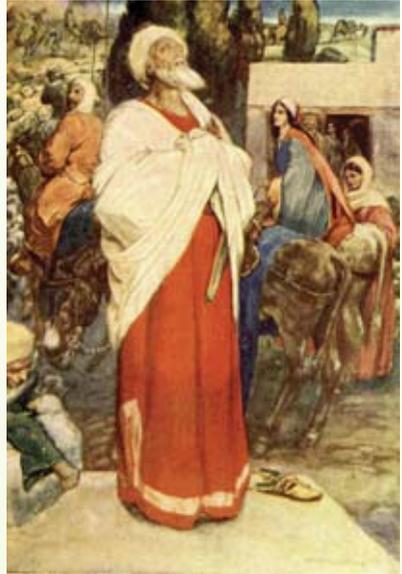
Abraham received many great promises from God, including the promise of a Land in which he and his descendants will one day dwell. But key to all of them was the promise of his seed or descendants through whom all this would come to pass. As **Dudley Fifield** now explains, the promises about Abraham's seed link both Old and New Testaments together. Understand this and you will have an important key to understanding a vital part of God's unfolding purpose.

① In Genesis chapter 12, when God first called Abram, He told him He would make of him a great nation (v. 2) then, when Abram came into the land of Canaan, the LORD made this declaration: *"To your descendants I will give this land"* (verse 7). The King James Version of the Bible uses the word "seed" instead of "descendants" which, like the original Hebrew text, can be either one descendant or many. It can be understood both in a singular and plural sense and, as we shall see, this is an important issue.

You have to look at each of the various promises and decide (just as the translators have done in this instance) whether the "seed" is singular or plural. Given the promise of verse 2 – that Abram would become a great nation – we might well suppose, at this juncture, that we should understand it as a plural – a great nation. That may be right, but it could be wrong. Wait and see!

② In chapter 13, after Abram and Lot had separated because their various flocks and herds were getting too large to feed together, God said this to Abram:

"Lift your eyes now and look from the place where you are – north-



ward, southward, eastward, and westward; for all the land which you see I give to you and your descendants (your seed) forever" (13:15).

Notice that an eternal inheritance is here promised both to Abram and his seed. For Abram, personally, this will involve his resurrection to eternal life, for he has long been dead – unconscious in the dust of the ground. As far as his "seed" is concerned, that promise could be understood in two ways. First, like him, they

could be made eternal, to live alongside their forefather. But it could also indicate that Abram's descendants would possess the land perpetually, through successive generations. That would not imply eternal life for all the individuals involved. Once again there is a designed ambiguity here.

3 In chapter 15, when God made a covenant concerning the land with Abram, the context clearly asserts that the reference to his "seed" is a promise concerning the nation of Israel, who should be given this land *"from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates"* (15:18), for they were to possess it instead of the ten listed nations that then occupied it. But the record explains that Abraham had a problem that had yet to be resolved. For the next chapter begins with this explanation: *"Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children"* (Genesis 16:1). For all the mention of a "seed" (whether singular or plural – one or many), Abraham and Sarah had no children and both of them were getting older.

4 In an attempt to resolve this issue, according to the custom of the time, Sarai gave Abram her handmaid Hagar, to raise up seed within the family. By this means a son was born named Ishmael, out of whom sprang some of the Arab peoples that inhabit the Middle East today. God says of him that:

"He shall be a wild man; his hand shall be against every man, and every man's hand against him. And he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren" (16:12).

This is the inheritance that God promised to the Arab people. Abram was 86 years old when Ishmael was born (16:16) and it was a remarkable 13 years later before God appeared to Abram and made a covenant with him, once more concerning his "seed". This is what God said: *"I will make my covenant between me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly"* (17:2). This time it was very clear that God was talking about a numerous offspring; indeed, God told him that he was to be the father of many nations and in token of this fact he changed his name from Abram to Abraham which means 'a father of a multitude'. God said that He would make an everlasting covenant with Abraham and with his seed after him, to give them all the land of Canaan for an everlasting possession (Genesis 17: 7-10). Furthermore, God told Abraham that his wife's name should be changed to Sarah (Princess) and that He would give him a son of her for, *"she shall be a mother of nations"* (17:16).

5 Fulfilling that promise would require a miracle for at this time Abraham was 99 years and Sarah 90. They were both well past the age when they could have expected to have a son by the normal process of procreation. It could only become a reality by God 'quicken' again their bodies. A miracle was necessary and in due time the miraculous birth of Isaac occurred.

He was indeed a child of their old age, but Abraham's faith had not yet been challenged to its limits. When Isaac was somewhat

grown up, although we don't know his precise age, Abraham was commanded to take him to Mount Moriah and there offer him as a sacrifice to God. Genesis chapter 22 describes Abraham's remarkable obedience, and his willingness to slay the lad because he believed that God would have raised him from the dead (Genesis 22:5, Hebrews 11:17-19 and James 2:21). Having tried Abraham's faith, God prevented him from offering his son and confirmed all the promises that He had made to him.

"By myself I have sworn, says the LORD, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son, in blessing I will bless you, and in multiplying I will multiply your descendants (your seed) as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore;

and your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice" (Genesis 22:16-18).

All the previous promises concerning the seed are encapsulated in this final revelation and it becomes evident that the "the seed" is intended to be understood in:

- ❖ a *natural* and a *spiritual* way, and
- ❖ a *singular* as well as a *plural* sense.

In the next issue, God willing, we will look at each of those aspects and bring New Testament teaching to bear.

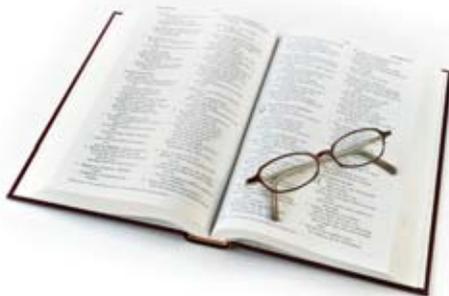
Dudley Fifield

Seek and Find

The wisdom of Almighty God
Though hidden can be heard
By those who want to know His will,
Through searching in His Word.

No counsel of ungodly men
Could wondrous Truth impart,
Nor can it come in mystic ways
Direct into the heart.

The Truth of God is written down,
Inspired, that we might know,
Faith comes by reading of God's Word
How we may wisely grow.



Gwen Marley

The Bible and Science

- ❖ Many of us think that it's not possible to take science seriously and also believe what the Bible has to say.
- ❖ Some people believe that scientists have proved that the universe started with a "Big Bang". The same people might also think that the Bible contradicts this.
- ❖ Many people also believe that scientists have proved that all life evolved. If this is true, then the Bible would be wrong in talking about life having been created.

These are some of the things we are going to think about a little more closely in this series of articles. It will help us find out more about these things if we distinguish between facts and theories. Comparing the Bible statements with the scientific observations, we will find that:

- ❖ Both suggest the universe had a beginning, and
- ❖ Both indicate that life appeared in a complete form.

1. Facts and theories

There is a lot of conflicting information about both science and the Bible. It will help us find the most useful information if we distinguish between two different fundamental ideas. Firstly we need to think about observable facts. Then we need to think about theories.

Observable facts



An observable fact is something that can be proved beyond doubt. These observable facts are tangible, measurable and repeatable. They can be felt through our senses and can be experienced first hand if necessary. Gravity is a good example of an observable fact. We all experience the effects of gravity

every day of our lives. Whenever we drop anything it always falls to the ground. Whenever we throw a ball into the air it always falls back to us. Scientists have done experiments and understand gravity enough to launch rockets into space and put satellites into orbit around the earth. So gravity is real and it can be experienced and measured. It is an observable fact.

Theories

A scientist then creates a theory about something he wants to look at in a little more detail. This will be based on a set of assumptions. This theory should be the best explanation of the observable facts. He could, for example, have a theory that gravity acts upwards. It would be obvious to



There is no conflict between scientific facts and what the Bible says

anyone that this does not fit the observable facts. Such a claim would be ignored.

But sometimes we have no way of knowing whether the assumptions used in a theory are right. This is often the case when considering what happened in the past. We can't do experiments to test the theory and check the assumptions.

So it is important that we know what can be proved and what is only a theory – something that cannot be proved.

Here are two examples where theories which lacked vital facts were trusted. The consequences were terrible.

Trusting unproven theories

In mid-nineteenth-century England, some public-health authorities believed the “miasma” theory. This theory said that diseases were caused by a poisonous vapour known as “miasma”. In the same era, some doctors accepted the “dyscrasia” theory, which said that disease was caused by an imbalance in the body's temperament.

People did their best with their limited knowledge. They were unaware that they lacked vital information about viruses and bacteria.

They trusted theories that were not based on all the facts. They saw no problem in drinking water that had been contaminated with sewage. The result was that tens of thousands of people died in the four cholera epidemics that broke out in England between 1831 and 1854.

Nor did they see a problem in a doctor or nurse moving from a dead body to a living one without washing their hands in between. So, up to one



in three women died in hospital giving birth. Many women preferred to give birth in the street rather than go to hospital.

Countless people died because these theories lacked vital facts. These two examples show that we need all the facts to come up with a correct theory. They also show us that we may not realise that we don't have all the facts.

- ❖ We can verify scientific facts.
- ❖ Facts are things we can repeat, touch, see and handle.
- ❖ Scientists create theories by looking at the observable facts and making assumptions to explain what has happened.
- ❖ A theory should be the best explanation of the facts.
- ❖ Lack of vital facts can result in wrong theories which can have terrible consequences.

Lawrence Cave

The World Financial Crisis

Let's be honest, the world's not a nice place right now ... everywhere we hear "doom and gloom" because of the recession and depression, and the result is yet more stress. All this has come about because of the financial mismanagement of banks and lending institutions, and over-valued share prices. So when the markets collapsed it led to such an international financial meltdown that it threatened to reach out and affect everyone.

Eggshell Thin

What a fragile financial society we now have. Yet, whether we like it or not, money makes the world go round. But when the brakes on the financial merry-go-round are applied with such force, things were bound to go wrong and people were going to get hurt.

What is remarkable is that the creation of wealth via the stock markets has more to do with "confidence" in a particular stock than it has with the products made by that company or the services it provides. When confidence is lost, or the profit projections are gloomy, shares can have millions wiped off their values. But share values are only theoretical anyway. Shares are only worth what people will pay for them. The chances are that your pension (if you have one) or any spare money you may have is invested in shares, if not by you then

by the institution that is looking after your money. No wonder there was such concern when the major Icelandic banks collapsed; many investors – including public bodies – lost a lot of money. Money may "make the world go around", as they say, but only when it's worth something!

What the Bible Says

Jesus focuses our minds on what our attitude to money and possessions should be in one of his sayings. He presents it in such a clear and unambiguous fashion that we have to ask ourselves "Have we been listening?" Here it is:



"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:19-21).

Our true riches are those things we have invested in finding out about God and trying to do what is right in His sight. Those investments can never be stolen – by banks or burglars – and they will never rust, or be eaten by moths. If we put our trust in God, He

can give us the best possible return – eternal life.

This important alternative is a long-established one in the Word of God. This is what one wise man said a thousand years before Jesus:

“Do not overwork to be rich; because of your own understanding, cease! Will you set your eyes on that which is not? For riches certainly make themselves wings; they fly away like an eagle toward heaven” (Proverbs 23:4,5).



Signs of the End

Indeed so, and with this in mind, why are you letting the financial crisis worry you, if you are? God feeds the birds and is able to count every hair on your head. He knows what's going on. The world as a whole is rolling down a slippery slope and human society will soon be destroyed. The financial meltdown is just another sign indicating the close return of God's King. It's a sign of the times: another pointer to the time of the end. The apostle Paul once said that “the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil” and instead of loving money he urged the pursuit of godliness. For, he said:

“Godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content” (1 Timothy 6:6-8).

So the lesson is clear. Examine yourselves to assess where your heart really is and then consider this. The present financial crisis could be the tip of the iceberg leading to more stress for the world and for you, if you let it.

If you have nothing else in life to think about except the size of your house, the make of your car, your next holiday destination and your style of clothing, then beware! People like that are fragile and financial pressure can shatter their existence. But people who believe God's promises are much more securely placed. Their lives are founded on certainty and they can have the assurance that whatever happens, God's purpose will surely prevail. What really matters is the sort of person you are within.

Tough times ahead

Things might get even tougher as the Coming of Jesus draws ever nearer. Even if we escape the worst effects, our close friends and dependents might find themselves out of work, unable to meet their living costs or pay the mortgage or the rent. Our behaviour to each other will reflect our faith and love in God and the way we respond to those challenges together will be another test for us, individually and communally. All these are things we need to think about and prepare for, so that the coming crises do not disturb our beliefs or unsettle us. We should know that we must expect one crisis to follow another as things get steadily worse.

But when they begin to get better just remember that they are due to get very much better when King Jesus rules from Jerusalem. Despite the present problems, we are on the brink of a new global society which will solve all our problems and establish the rule of God on earth. Just keep watching the signs and keep reading God's Word so you know what you have to do to be part of that coming age!

David Bilton

Paul Addresses the Crowd

*The apostle Paul had been arrested by the Roman authorities in Jerusalem because of crowd trouble and was about to be taken into custody when he asked for permission to address the crowd of hostile Jews who were trying to kill him. The account of all this is to be found in Acts chapters 21 and 22, and **John Hellowell** now explains the significance of Paul's words.*

What Paul Said

Paul's defence in Jerusalem is the first of a series of addresses in the next few chapters of Acts. In each of these speeches it is evident that Paul tailors his account for the particular occasion and for the audience to whom he is speaking.

Here, before the crowd who probably have little knowledge of his past other than hearsay regarding his undermining of the Law and his indulgent attitude to the Gentiles, he is careful to be tactful and courteous. It seems that he regards this as a preaching opportunity and that he hoped he might influence some of his listeners. By speaking in Aramaic (Acts 21:40), rather than Greek, he was emphasising his ethnic unity with his audience.

Paul began by providing biographical details of which his audience were probably unaware. He states that he is a Jew; born in Tarsus (outside the Holy Land) but in a city with a significant Jewish population. Although it had a reputable university, he was educated in Jerusalem; a Pharisee (confirmed in Acts 26:5) who was taught at the feet of Gamaliel (see Acts 5:34-39; a highly respected teacher). There he had been instructed in the strict manner of the law of the fathers.

Paul claimed that he had the same

zeal which they were now expressing (in trying to kill him!). Again he is showing tact, complimenting his audience on their commendable (if misplaced!) zeal. His own zeal was evident in his:

- ❖ persecution to death of those in "the Way" (i.e. Christianity)
- ❖ binding men and women and committing them to prison
- ❖ prosecuting them in distant cities such as Damascus, with the approval of the High Priest.

The mention of the High Priest and the Elders (i.e. the Sanhedrin) was probably intended to show that he had, at least in the past, the confidence and approval of the highest Jewish authorities. He now recounted the reasons for his past dramatic change of allegiance, the details of which were almost certainly not known to the crowd. The date of the current events was about 55AD, while his conversion occurred some 22 years previously, around 33AD.

Paul's Conversion

Paul explained that, on approaching Damascus at noon he was suddenly surrounded by a light from heaven ("brighter than the sun" Acts 26:13). This had to be supernatural, nothing

less than Divine glory – the Shekinah glory! This was unmistakable evidence of Divine intervention. Falling to the ground Paul heard the Lord Jesus ask: “Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?” In return Paul asked: “Who are you, Lord?” And the reply was: “I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting”.

This answer not only established how the Lord was so closely associated with his disciples but, in the context of Paul’s defence, it was important in explaining the dramatic conversion that had taken place. He had been Saul of Tarsus, the man who had savagely persecuted the church, as he had already explained. Paul now recounts the question he asked: “What shall I do, Lord?”

This too was important for the benefit of the crowd: they needed to recognise that Paul’s actions were not determined by his own whim or inclination. It was Jesus who had instructed him to: “Get up and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do”.

Paul was blinded by the bright light (but not his companions, who probably did not look up as Paul did). So he was taken by the hand and guided to Damascus. This statement seems to confirm that the party was travelling on foot and not on horses or camels as some commentators have supposed.

Action at Damascus

The scene now changed to Damascus where Paul was visited by Ananias, whose credentials are stressed. He was a devout observer of the Law and he was highly respected by the Jews living there. Ananias restored Paul’s sight. This miracle would greatly enhance Ananias’ credentials in the eyes of the crowd, preparing the way

for the next, and crucial point, Paul’s new commission, which was then detailed:

- ❖ “The God of our fathers (the God of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and the God of Moses, who likewise received a commission directly from God) [note the emphasis on the unity of purpose – our fathers]
- ❖ has chosen you to know His Will and
- ❖ to see the Righteous One (that is, the Messiah or Christ) [note the avoidance of naming him as the Lord Jesus] and
- ❖ to hear his voice, and
- ❖ to be a witness to all men of what you have seen and heard” [note the universality of his witness – to all men]

In this defence Paul was making some shrewd points as part of his witness to the crowd at Jerusalem. He reminded them that he had been a Pharisee – one of the strictest sects in Judaism, so he had been someone with the very best of Jewish credentials. But now, before he could pursue the heavenly commission, he needed to do something else: he had to be baptised:

“And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord” (Acts 22:16).

Do you get the point? Even this “Hebrew of the Hebrews”, who would later say that “concerning the righteousness which is by the law” he was “blameless” (Philippians 3:5,6) had to submit to baptism. All his highly regarded Jewish credentials counted for nothing!

John Hellawell

Creation – The Beginning of God’s Purpose

Scientists using the world’s two largest digital cameras at telescopes in Hawaii discovered eight new moons around Jupiter, the solar system’s largest planet. Each moon measures between 1.2 and 2.4 miles in diameter, and the scientists think there are probably many more small satellites to be discovered.

For most of us such new discoveries of the wonders of the universe are fantastic. For believers in the Bible they are further evidence of the greatness of Almighty God. Like the psalmist in the Bible it causes one to declare:

“May you be blessed by the LORD, who made heaven and earth. The heaven, even the heavens, are the Lord’s” (Psalm 115:15,16).

In the Beginning

Much has been made in the media of the Hubble telescope and the Hadron Collider and the Big Bang, that is said to have started everything. But the psalmist had already discovered how everything came into existence; for he declared that the LORD made heaven and earth. The Bible begins with those magnificent words ...

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1),

... and its inspired writers are all in agreement with that statement. Wise King Solomon says in Ecclesiastes that the human quest to solve the secret of life is destined to fail because nobody will ever be able to understand the ways of God:

*“He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that **no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end**” (3:11).*

God, he says, has given mankind a sense of the eternal – that there is more to life than mere existence. But we should not delude ourselves that we can therefore fathom the unfathomable. God is in heaven and we are on the earth (Ecclesiastes 5:2).

“In the beginning God...”

But go back to Genesis and its opening words. That simple yet comprehensive statement precedes a detailed account of everything making up our environment on the planet we live on – sea and land, trees and plants, fish, animals and insects, even the air we breathe. The only part of the scene whose beginning is not recorded is that of the Creator Himself. Elsewhere the Bible tells us God is immortal, invisible, eternal – ideas which are beyond our comprehension, but which serve as a reminder that however clever we may sometimes think ourselves to be, our understanding is limited. But the very fact we are able to understand so many other things is evidence of the special part mankind plays in this wonderful creation story. As children we have to be taught, and as we grow we learn to assess information, to make up our minds what to do about what we learn.

You want to learn about what the Bible teaches? So far as the creation

of our planet is concerned the first verse of Genesis would have been sufficient if all God wanted to teach us is that He is the Creator. But He goes on to give further details by telling us of things we are familiar with – plants, trees, animals and the creation of mankind.

Creative Word

The Bible tells us who it was that created the world so that we can believe in the creative power of God. Nothing happened by accident: it was part of His purpose, and the New Testament reminds us that we have to exercise belief and trust in God, when there are things we do not, and cannot, understand in life:

“By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible” (Hebrews 11:3).

Before the divine words were spoken, we are told that the earth was “without form, and void” (Gen 1:2). It was an empty wilderness. That it is a ball-shaped mass in revolution is not stated in Genesis, but later on in the Bible we read of the Creator that:

“He stretches out the north over empty space; He hangs the earth on nothing” (Job 26:7).

This was written long before our space age, and it indicates that much more is revealed in the Bible than could have been known by mere human thinking. For the Bible is the Word of God and is concerned to explain that everything that has happened came about as part of a purposeful plan. The world was created and shaped by God’s power – Genesis tells us that from the beginning the Spirit of God was hovering over the

face of the waters – and that power was purposeful.

What for?

It might be thought presumptuous to ask why God made the world and what purpose He had in mind. It was the prophet Isaiah who once asked: *“Shall the clay say to him who forms it, ‘What are you making?’ Or shall your handiwork say, ‘He has no hands?’” (45:9).* Yet in the very same context we read His declaration:

“I have made the earth, and created man on it. It was I – My hands that stretched out the heavens, and all their host I have commanded” (45:12).

Then God discloses why He made everything – formed and shaped it with such loving care:

“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. I have not spoken in secret, in a dark place of the earth; I did not say to the seed of Jacob, ‘Seek Me in vain’; I, the LORD, speak righteousness, I declare things that are right” (45:18,19).

God did not create the earth in vain, He created it to be inhabited, and what He has revealed in His book, the Bible, is right! But do you notice the other detail in those verses? The Creator of heaven and earth invites people to seek Him. He does not simply want the earth peopled. He wants us to have a personal relationship with Him! What a remarkable opportunity which is now being offered to us!

Roy Waddoup

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