

Glad Tidings

OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

1550



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OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

129th Year

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A monthly magazine published by the Christadelphians (brothers and sisters in Christ) and available throughout the world.

Its objectives are – to encourage the study of the Bible as God's inspired message to men; to call attention to the Divine offer of forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ; and to warn men and women that soon Christ will return to Earth as judge and ruler of God's world-wide Kingdom.

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The Long Road Ahead

As the world economy continues along the slow road to recovery, people are beginning to wonder if their standard of living will ever recover to what it once was. As inflation outstrips wage increases, the truth is gradually dawning that hard times lie ahead for many years to come. Austerity and cutbacks are likely to be around for the foreseeable future.

Welcome Break

If you ever find yourself walking in countryside as delightful as that featured on this month's front cover – in Pertisan, Austria – and you come to this very spot, would you mind about the long road that twisted and turned ahead? It might depend how fit you were feeling, or how far you had already walked. And your feelings might be affected by your companions, if any, and their attitude. But just look at what lies ahead!

The road climbs up and up, offering spectacular views when you reach the top. There are many others walking along, so you are not alone. And there appears to be a restaurant half way up, where you can break your journey and get some refreshment. It is no wonder that the group of walkers in question are striding out in anticipation, despite the uphill climb.

End in Sight?

If there was a clear vision of the future for the world economy, or for the next generation, people might be a bit more inclined to accept the present hardships and disappointments. But nobody can offer that clarity because there are so many unforeseeable hap-

penings. Nobody, that is, except the God who made this beautiful world. God knows exactly how things will work out, and when, and has told us what the future holds in the Bible. But the Bible isn't just a set of amazing prophecies, many of which have already been fulfilled. It is a book about people and their extraordinary journeys through life, sometimes up and sometimes downhill.

The oldest man who ever lived, at a time when people lived a lot longer than today, was named Methuselah. He lived for 969 years and his name said it all, for it meant "*When he is dead it shall be sent*". Something was going to happen when this faithful man died and it became increasingly clear what that something was. First his father – Enoch – was given a prophecy about the time in which they lived and it concerned increasing ungodliness, for the world was turning away from God and was becoming ever more immoral and violent. This is the message he was given:

Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of His saints, to execute judgment on all, to convict all who are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds which they have committed in an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him (Jude 14–15).

Coming Judgment

Then Enoch was removed from the scene because of the increasing violence of his contemporaries, who can't have appreciated his message of

coming destruction. But then Methuselah's grandson – Noah – got another message from God, this time commanding him to build an ark in which he and his family could be saved when God's judgment came upon that godless society.

God said to Noah, "The end of all flesh has come before Me, for the earth is filled with violence through them; and behold, I will destroy them with the earth. Make yourself an ark of gopher-wood; make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and outside with pitch..." (Genesis 6:13–14).

Perhaps Methuselah and Noah's father Lamech helped with the building of the ark, as would his sons and their wives. Every day they would have been keeping an eye on Methuselah and his health to see that he was still fit and well, for, as his name indicated, when he died the promised flood would come. But he lived on and on, until the ark was almost finished and there was a way of escape for Noah's family and the animals they had assembled.

New World Ahead!

Day after day the opportunity was thus given to others to join Noah and his family; day after day they were ridiculed. The promise of a new start in a new-made world was rejected and, in the end – when Methuselah died – there were only eight people who had chosen to be part of God's new world. But the prolongation of Methuselah's life shows very clearly that God wanted to give everybody a chance of being saved. So he kept that faithful man alive longer than anybody else, before or since.

If you knew that a new start for the world was just around the corner, would you want to be part of it? Like

the walkers in Austria, would you be surging ahead looking for new vistas to explore, new sights to see, new companions to befriend? Or would you choose, instead, to believe that things will get better in time due to human endeavour, sound economics and hard work?

Jesus offered his own predictions about the way of the world before his return to earth, to rule as king. He foretold times of trouble and growing anxiety, to the point of despair. He also predicted that the godlessness and violence of the days of Noah would be repeated, just as we are now seeing:

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

The Son of Man

This was the term that Jesus used of himself to explain that he was someone experiencing all the stresses and strains of life on earth. But it also describes One who is destined to rule for God when the Kingdom is established on earth. For the Son of Man is predicted to be given the Kingdom by his Father – the Ancient of Days – and that Kingdom will never be destroyed (Daniel 7:13,14).

If we want to be part of that new age, we need to take advantage of the opportunity now offered us and walk with Jesus along the road ahead.

Editor

The Kingdom of God

The Bible is completely the Word of God. It was written by men who were endowed with God's Holy Spirit power and the result was just as Paul wrote to Timothy:

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16–17).

Jesus & the Old Testament

Although it is not now given the attention it deserves, the Old Testament was the basis of the gospel taught by the Lord Jesus. He often quoted extensively from that collection of inspired books and challenged his Jewish opponents with phrases like: *“Have ye not read”* (see Matthew 12:3, 5; 19:4; 21:16, 42; 22:31; 24:15; Mark 12:26; 13:14 and Luke 10:26).



We see from this that Jesus accepted the Old Testament as having God-given authority. What was written in *“the Law and the Prophets”* was for him the gold standard of truth. It follows that we should not be unduly surprised to learn that the Lord’s teaching about *“the kingdom of God”* or *“the kingdom of heaven”* originates in Old Testament times. As he once said to two disciples whom he met after his resurrection:

“O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into his glory?” And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, he expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself (Luke 24:25–27).

God’s Kingdom on Earth

The Kingdom of God existed on earth when King David ruled in Israel. He and his successor, King Solomon, ruled on *“the throne of the LORD”* (1 Chronicles 29:23). The first Kingdom of God was the kingdom of Israel – when God ruled over them as King. It was Gideon – one of their early judges – who refused to found a dynasty, for this reason:

“I will not rule over you, nor shall my son rule over you; the Lord shall rule over you” (Judges 8:23).

Some time later the people of Israel asked Samuel to give them a human king to reign over them – this displeased Samuel (1:Samuel 8:6) – He prayed to the LORD about this and God told Samuel:

“Heed the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me, that I should not reign over them” (1 Samuel 8:7).

Kings: First to Last

Saul was the first king of Israel – he was popular with the people because he ‘looked like a King and had the stature and bearing of one’ (see 1 Samuel 9:2). But because he went astray from God, God turned away from him and the kingdom was given to David ‘a man after God’s own heart’ (1 Samuel 13:14).

At the time of Israel & Judah’s captivity, the original Kingdom of God was taken away from them because of disobedience and wickedness, as God explained to the prophet Ezekiel when denouncing the last king of Judah, a man named Zedekiah:

Now to you, O profane, wicked prince of Israel, whose day has come, whose iniquity shall end, thus says the Lord God: “Remove the turban, and take off the crown; nothing shall remain the same. Exalt the humble, and humble the exalted. Overthrown, overthrown, I will make it overthrown! It shall be no longer, until he comes whose right it is, and I will give it to him” (Ezekiel 21:25–27).



Coming King

The One “whose right it is” is the Lord Jesus Christ, who is a descendant of David and the Son of God. When he comes again, he will establish the Kingdom of God once more on earth (Acts 1:6, 10-11). The restored Kingdom of God, under the immortal Lord Jesus Christ, will be a time of justice and salvation from sin, after the momentous events of the resurrection from the dead and the endowment of eternal life upon those who believed in Jesus during their lifetime.

Jesus the Christ, the Anointed One, the coming King, will restore the world and the people in it to their intended place in God’s creation. Jesus will rule from Jerusalem and from there he will bring about a worldwide reformation. At last, the city will become the “City of Peace.” (See Isaiah 2:2-4; 11:1-9; 32:1, Daniel 2:44; 7:13-14, Zechariah 14:4,8-9 and 2 Thessalonians 1:7-10.)

Life on earth will then be as God intended from the outset. Those who are with Jesus in his Kingdom will be people from all ages who have put their faith and trust in him and have witnessed to that faith by their baptism and their manner of life.

When we accept Jesus as our Saviour we try to live as he would want us to live, following him and trying to keep his commandments. That way we join the company of those who share a hope of life with him in a perfect world. Such people look with hope and eagerness for the day of his return when, as scripture promises, he will “make all things new” (Revelation 21:5).

Grahame A Cooper

A King's Dream

The certainty of God establishing a physical kingdom on this earth that will replace the kingdoms of men, was foretold long ago.

We have had occasion before in this series to refer to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon who ruled about 600 years before Christ. One night he had a very vivid dream which greatly disturbed him. He would not tell anyone what it was about but demanded that his wise men tell him the dream and its interpretation. Of course no one could do this unless God revealed it to him, and this is what happened.

Multi-Metal Monster

The dream was revealed by God to the prophet Daniel and he was thus able to both describe the dream to the king and give him its interpretation. The record of what transpired is in Daniel chapter 2.

In verses 31 to 35, Daniel describes the dream to Nebuchadnezzar. The king had seen a large image composed of various metals. It had a head of gold, chest and arms of silver, belly and thighs of bronze, legs of iron, and feet part of iron and part of clay. As he watched, the King saw a stone which had been cut out of a mountain, but not by human hands, strike the image on the feet and break it in pieces. The metals became as the chaff of the summer threshing floors and the wind carried them away, but the stone became a great mountain which filled the whole earth.

In verses 36 to 45, Daniel reveals the meaning to the king. He explained

that the four metals of the image represented four successive empires that would arise. The head of gold represented Nebuchadnezzar himself and his kingdom of Babylon. This was to be succeeded by various other empires. The book of Daniel itself identifies the next two represented by the silver and the bronze as the Medo-Persian and Greek empires. The fourth represented by the iron is most certainly the Roman empire.



Prophetic Time Line

History reveals that these were the four successive empires which ruled Israel while they were still a nation in their own land. Following the destruction of Jerusalem in AD70 and the Bar Kochba revolt in AD132-5, the Jews were exiled from their land and were scattered around the world.

Now that Israel is a nation back in its land, there is no dominant empire controlling it. Instead it is surrounded by a mixture of strong and weak nations represented by the image's feet being part of iron and part of clay. The influence of Rome is still with us today among the nations, particularly in Europe where Rome was dominant, and although the nations both round about Israel and further afield seek to control the land there is no real cohesion among them.

This brings us to the time of the end for there is one part of this prophecy yet to be fulfilled, that is the shattering of the image by the rock cut out of the mountain, but not by human hands, striking it on the feet and grinding everything to powder.

Whereas you saw the feet and toes, partly of potter's clay and partly of iron, the kingdom shall be divided; yet the strength of the iron shall be in it, just as you saw the iron mixed with ceramic clay. And as the toes of the feet were partly of iron and partly of clay, so the kingdom shall be partly strong and partly fragile. As you saw iron mixed with ceramic clay, they will mingle with the seed of men; but they will not adhere to one another, just as iron does not mix with clay. And 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 2:41–45).

Kingdom of God

The image itself represents the kingdoms of men which will be replaced by the Kingdom of God which is to be established when Jesus returns to earth. This physical kingdom will be just as much a dominating power as those which preceded it, for it replaces them and takes control of the world.

This will be done progressively, for the stone, which represents the Lord Jesus Christ (Matthew 21:42, 1 Peter 2:7), first strikes the image on the feet then breaks in pieces the entire image and finally grows to fill the earth. We are now living in the days represented by the feet of the image, waiting for the return of the Lord, when the following words from Revelation will also be fulfilled.

Then the seventh angel sounded: and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!" (Revelation 11:15).

As Daniel says, "the dream is certain and its interpretation sure".

John Shepley

True Religion

There's a lot of talk nowadays about the different religions there are in the world, and their relative attractions and what they offer – Church of England, Roman Catholicism, Buddhism, Jehovah's Witnesses, Christadelphian, etc., etc. But what do we mean by "religion"?

Religion: A Bind!

Our English word "religion" comes from Latin, and it means "to bind together again". You can see the word in action when you think that "ligament" is the tissue which holds or binds together the different parts of our limbs – like our knees or our elbows – and enables them to twist and turn as they are meant to do.



So, from the word alone, we can deduce that religion is something that would bind mankind again to God, so that the breach which Adam made in his relationship with God in Eden could be repaired. Religion is that which binds us back to God.

When we think of choosing a religion, we have to judge it by whether we think it will achieve the defined purpose of binding us back to God again.

Unbound!

I suggest that some of the religions we mentioned above do not achieve that purpose, and indeed many do not appear to set out to do so. They may be referred to possibly as "faith systems", or "mysticism", but they are not really true religions. Really, the only religion that complies with our definition is the Christian religion. But with so many Christian denominations, how can we decide which one most fully answers to the purpose of binding us back to God?

The only satisfactory way to decide is to compare their teachings with the Bible. God really wants us to be bound back to Him again, and that's why He gave us the Bible, so that we know how much He loves us and what He wants us to do.

Bible Truth

The Bible is the only source of divine information about:

- ❖ why we were created (to emulate the image and character of God);
- ❖ why we are subject to sin and death (because man disobeyed God), and
- ❖ it alone offers us a solution to our dire condition (the forgiveness of our sins, by linking our lives with that of Jesus in baptism).

Another word the Bible uses in this connection is "reconciliation" – the original Greek word means "to change thoroughly." We need to be changed or reconciled if we are to be bound to God once again. One Bible passage

which tells us how much we need God's help in our recovery reads as follows:

At that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made both one ... and that he might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity (Ephesians 2:12–16).

Another passage says this:

... having made peace through the blood of his cross. And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now he has reconciled in the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in his sight ... (Colossians 1:20–22).

Reconciliation

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new. Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:17–20).

These verses confirm our definition at the beginning that the way back to

God is through a recognition of our sins, and by availing ourselves of the sacrifice of Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins, and by being baptised into him to identify ourselves as true Christians. The only way we can have knowledge and instruction about this salvation, which is the true religion, is in the Bible, God's message of salvation and love to us.

Impelled to Act

Before we leave the question of what constitutes true religion, we need to be aware that the word "religion" itself appears in the Bible only in the New Testament. In four out of the five occurrences the Greek word used is the word "*threskeia*" or "*threskos*", which means "outward religious service". In other words, it features the things which religion impels us to do, or the things by which we demonstrate our religion. That has nothing to do with the meaning of the English word "religion," which we've looked at, but it tells us the sort of things we should do for other people in response to what God has done for us. If we want to be like Him, and be bound back to Him then we try to act in a way which is pleasing to Him.

The apostle James writes about practical Christianity and says this:

Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world (James 1:27).

So, let's all go and practise both of these two aspects of religion in our lives from now on!

Hamilton Wilson

God's Gracious Laws

It is plain to see that men and women have happier lives if we are all subject to laws – but they have to be good laws and they have to apply to everyone equally.

The Bible says that the laws contained in its pages were given by God our Creator; and that by keeping them we shall not only be happier as a society, but we shall be pleasing to God. If we want to be part of His family, then pleasing God is what we should desire to do.

In the beginning

The first law was given to two individuals, and it was very simple. Unfortunately it was broken and the consequences were extensive. Then, as the human population grew, more laws were added with the intention of limiting evil and keeping society under control. But only six chapters into the Bible, we read this:

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 result was the great flood from which Noah and his family alone were saved. Already, the division between those who wanted to please God and those who refused was very clear.

When we reach the lifetime of Abraham, we find that God's law had developed further, although we are not told all the details at that stage. In Genesis 26:5, Isaac is reminded that his father Abraham:

obeyed God's voice, and kept His charge, commandments, statutes and laws.

God was making a fresh start, as it were, with Abraham's family. A few hundred years later the family had grown into a nation, as had been promised to Abraham in Genesis 12:2. God wanted this nation to be an example to all others, so, with more people to control, a fuller system of laws was necessary.

The Law of Moses

This brings us to the set of laws described in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. The apostle Paul in the New Testament explains its real purpose:

What purpose then does the law serve? It was added because of transgressions, till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made; and it was appointed through angels by the hand of a mediator (Galatians 3:19).

In other words, the reason why the Law of Moses was so detailed was because a whole nation could not be trusted to apply the great principle of loving God wholeheartedly as well as

loving their neighbours as themselves. Lots of do's and don't's had to be spelled out, with penalties enforced for disobedience. In each generation though, there were people like Abraham who wanted to do as God asked, because they loved Him. These were the people who God was really seeking. In His mercy they would be part of His eternal purpose.

The Law Fulfilled

When Jesus came, the Law of Moses was getting near to its end. Jesus said he did not come to destroy it but to fulfil it (Matthew 5:17), and this is what he did. He obeyed that law perfectly, showing everyone exactly how it should be kept. But then, because he exposed the hypocrisy of the Jewish leaders, they executed him. That was the worst act of rebellion committed by the Jewish nation and, a few years later, the Romans destroyed their city and temple.

With the temple destroyed, it was impossible to keep the Law of Moses properly, so temple worship was finished. In a more fundamental way,



Temple stones thrown down in the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70

however, in the marvellous wisdom of God, the death of Jesus was also the final sacrifice for sins. Jesus' sacrifice superseded the details of the Law of Moses – it fulfilled them and did away with the need for them.

The Teaching of Jesus

The basic principles of God's laws – loving God and our fellow humans – remain. After the Jewish nation was scattered by the Romans, God concentrated once more on individuals, both Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews). Now, people are called out by the Gospel to become His children and to follow Jesus, wherever they live. God's laws for us in these days are contained in the teaching of Jesus, recorded in the Gospels. Matthew chapters 5 to 7 give us a clear summary of how we are to live.

When the time is right, (very soon I believe), Jesus will return and start to fill the earth with God's glory, as promised. Then God's law will be enforced world-wide and will gradually bring all mankind under His control. It will bring peace and great contentment to all who are willing to accept God's way. The prophet Isaiah makes this wonderful prediction:

Many people shall come and say, "Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths." For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem (Isaiah 2:3).

What a wonderful hope that is by which to guide our lives!

John Woodall

Getting to Know God

*How do we get to know anyone? Is it possible to know someone you have never met? For example, can you get to know an artist just by studying his or her artistic work? Starting with these questions, **Anna Hart** explores how we can get to know God, who we have not met.*

Artistic Work

You may get some clues about the type of scenery an artist likes, by studying his portfolio. But what can the paintings tell you about his moral standards, his likes or dislikes? It is unlikely that you would be able to deduce much useful information.

Or think about a musical composition. Some composers have set scriptural words to pieces of music which are so moving that a listener can be reduced to tears. We might imagine that a composer able to do this would have a strong religious faith. However, this is certainly not always the case, and some very popular religious music has been composed by self-declared atheists.

So a person's body of work does not, of itself, help you to know the individual. Even people we have met and think we know can react differently from how we expect, for people are unpredictable by nature. It is only when they tell us about themselves that we can start to understand them.

God's Handiwork

It follows that whilst we can learn something about God by studying His creative handiwork, we cannot conclude that we know what He is like just because we are keen students of nature. We need something more if we are to get to know the God who made the universe. The Bible says this:

The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork (Psalm 19:1).

When we look at nature we certainly see beauty, and many people would argue that there is clear evidence of design. There is majesty in high mountains, peace in a babbling brook, glory in a fiery sunset and excitement in a roaring sea. But what does this tell you about the character of God? Nature also gives us earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanoes, storms, hurricanes, beasts of prey, suffering and death. What do these things tell us about God?

Wrong Assumptions

We often hear people say things like 'I can't imagine a God who would disapprove of ...' or 'I am sure that God would not mind...' or 'God would like that'. On what basis can people make these statements? Have they read the Bible? Do they think they can understand God merely by looking at His handiwork and using their own reasoning powers! Why should the work of God in nature tell us about His character, when the work of artists and musicians tell us so little about the characters of the artists?

Because God is so much greater than His creation, we cannot predict what He will do in any particular circumstance or think we know Him. His ways are very different from our ways and His thoughts are far beyond our level of mental attainment (Isaiah

55:9). To take one example: the Bible – the Word of God – assures us that ‘*God is love*’ (1 John 4: 8). But we cannot use our own understanding of what that means in practice, and then say that we know what God would do in any given circumstance. Would we ever imagine that a loving God would do the following?

- ❖ Swallow men up in an earthquake after they had rebelled against Moses (Numbers 16: 28-32);
- ❖ Kill a man because he touched the holy ark of God when it was being transported (2 Sam 6:6,7);
- ❖ Make two Christian believers drop dead because they lied to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:1-10).
- ❖ Kill a man for accepting praise and not giving glory to God (Acts 12:21-23)

The outcome for these people was fearsome. It is unlikely that they could have predicted their fate, or maybe even appreciated the enormity of their mistakes. How much better it would have been if they had understood God better.

Mercy and Compassion

For the Bible also describes God as: “*merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in mercy*” (Psalm 103:8). Elsewhere He is said to be “*The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth*” (Exodus 34:6). It follows that there are amazing examples of people who were spared from destruction.

- ❖ Following the pleading of a faithful man, He agreed not to destroy two

cities if there were ten righteous people there (Gen 18:23-32);

- ❖ A prostitute and her family were saved from destruction after she showed faith in God (Joshua 6:25);
- ❖ King David was spared the death penalty for committing adultery and then murder (2 Samuel 12:7-13);
- ❖ God did not carry out His threat to punish a pagan city when they repented at the words of a prophet (Jonah 3);
- ❖ Jesus promised a convicted thief a place in the coming Kingdom (Luke 23:42,43); and, best of all,
- ❖ God gave His only begotten Son to save those who believe (John3:16).

The Lesson for Us

If we want to be treated like the people in the second list, we need to understand what God is like, why He does what He does, and what He asks of us. It can be a ‘*fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God*’ (Hebrews 10:31) who, after all, controls our very breath and life (Psalm 104:29, Acts 17:25).

We simply cannot deduce what God is like by sitting and contemplating, by imagination or by deduction: for He has given us details in the Bible.

God is clearly a God of judgement as well as a God of great mercy. So it is a matter of life and death to learn of Him from His own Word, and not from philosophy or human ideas.

It is urgent and essential that we read the Bible prayerfully and obey what it asks us to do.

Anna Hart

The New Testament

*For the past two years **David Pearce** has been summarising the books of the Old Testament and now he turns his attention to the New Testament. But he first explains that although the two are separated by just a few pages in our Bibles, they are in fact separated by quite a long time, during which there was no message from God.*

Four Hundred Years

As we turn over from Malachi to Matthew, four long centuries pass by. All this time, the people of Judah who returned to their land from Babylon in the time of Cyrus, continued there under the rule of the Medes and Persians, then the Greeks, and finally the Romans. They were a subject people, and had to pay taxes to their overlords. They had no king themselves.

One Greek ruler, Antiochus, tried to impose Greek ideas and religion on the Jews, but met with fierce and ultimately successful opposition. The dramatic story of this period is told in the two books of the Maccabees in the Apocrypha (the Apocrypha is a collection of books not considered by the Jews or the early Church to be inspired by God's Holy Spirit). The biblical prophet Daniel, in his 11th chapter, provides an accurate key to many of the kings (and queens) who would come and go in the years between the Testaments.

Roman Rule

As the New Testament begins, the Roman Empire is under the firm rule of the Emperor Augustus. In 42 BC the Romans appointed Herod the Great to govern the land of Israel. This cruel and selfish monarch was an Idumean (descended from Esau) by birth. He had no Jewish blood. He had convinced the Romans he would be a

good ally and, to please his masters, he built a great port on the Mediterranean coast of Israel called Caesarea, named after the Emperor.

He also pleased his Jewish subjects by building a new Temple in Jerusalem. This magnificent edifice was constructed on the site of the Second Temple erected by Joshua and Zerubbabel, which was demolished to make way for the new one. The huge stones of the foundation platform on which the Temple was built can still be seen today. Herod's Temple was still being built in the lifetime of Jesus and was finished just a few years before it was destroyed by the Romans!

The Birth of Jesus

The precise date of the birth of Jesus is disputed, but we know that Herod was on the throne when the Wise Men (Magi) from the east came looking for a new king in Judea. For they went to Herod's palace, expecting that the new King of the Jews would have been born there, only to be told by Herod's advisers that the Biblical prophecy indicated that the child was to be born a few miles away, in 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, whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting (Micah 5:2).

Herod died, according to Josephus, a Jewish historian contemporary with Jesus, 37 years after his appointment by the Romans. If so, he died in 4 BC. Since Jesus was a 'young child' when he was found by the Magi, he must have been born between 4 and 5 BC. This means the conventional dating for the beginning of the Christian era, drawn up by a monk called 'Little Dennis' in 525 AD, is adrift by a few years.

Religious Leaders

At the beginning of the New Testament, there were several groups at the head of the Jewish state.

❖ Herodians

These made up a political party which was happy to cooperate with King Herod, and therefore despised by Jews with nationalistic leanings.

❖ Scribes

These were priests entrusted with the copying out of the Hebrew Scriptures for use in the synagogues (places of assembly for worship).

❖ Pharisees

These were considered highly religious. They wore exquisite robes

and fasted and washed. Their stance was to uphold the strict observance of the Law of Moses, but they had added many man-made traditions of their own.

❖ Sadducees

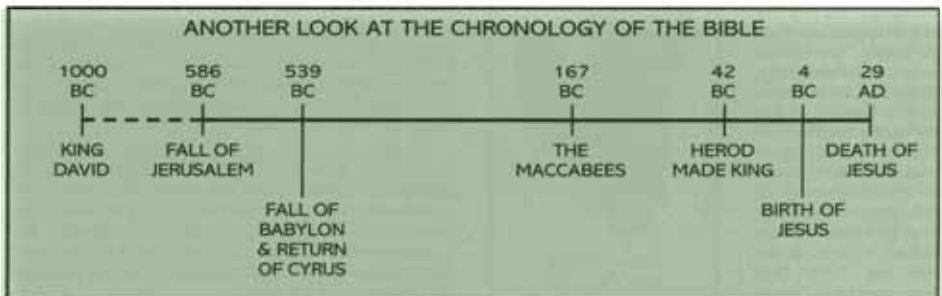
The Sadducees, a group based in Jerusalem, ran the Temple under licence from the Romans, and were more interested in money than in piety. They opposed the Pharisees in matters of doctrine, accepting the authority only of the writings of Moses.

❖ Zealots

There were also minority factions such as the Zealots who wanted to restore independence. One of the Apostles (followers of Jesus chosen by him to be preachers) was Simon the Zealot, perhaps referring to his background before he became a disciple.

It was into this divided and complicated world that Jesus was born of the virgin Mary, to begin a new agreement between God and mankind – a New Testament.

David M Pearce



At the Areopagus

Following the difference of opinion with Barnabas, Paul took Silas to visit groups of believers in Derbe and Lystra, cities in Asia Minor (now part of Turkey).

From there they moved on to Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea, cities in Europe. In Philippi they were joined by Timothy, a young man whose mother was Jewish, though he had a Greek father. There were problems in Berea, and it became unsafe for Paul to remain there, though Timothy and Silas stayed on. Paul went instead to Athens and was there by himself until the others could join him.

Athens

Athens was the centre of Greek culture and was a city full of shrines to various gods, all idols of course. The apostle was incensed at this, and took every opportunity to discuss the issue with anyone who might be interested. As usual he began in the synagogue with the Jews and other devout people, but extended his work to the market places as well. Here he was heard by some of the local philosophers, who sensed that this might be something new. They loved to hear anything new, so they took Paul to the Areopagus to explain his teaching,

The Areopagus, sometimes called Mars Hill, was one of the lower hills to the west of the Acropolis in Athens. It was here that the supreme court of Athens met, consisting of venerable and eminent citizens. The seats on which they sat are still visible. Paul addressed an informal gathering of philosophers, presenting a carefully

constructed and ingenious presentation of the gospel, to this eminent group who had no background of Old Testament Jewish teaching, nor any concept of the ministry of the Lord Jesus. If his speech did not produce many converts to Christianity, it was due more to the nature of his audience than the quality of what he said.

The Unknown God

He began quite flatteringly, telling the Athenians that he had found them very religious. He had seen in his wanderings around the city, looking at the many shrines, an altar with the inscription “*To the unknown god*”. Seemingly the Athenians wanted to ensure they had included every possible god in their worship. But Paul now explained that they had in fact missed the most important god of all: the only true and living God. This was a bold statement indeed, in a city of so many idols:

As I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you: God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. Nor is He worshiped with men’s hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things (Acts 17:23–25).

Old Testament Truth

Long before, the prophet Isaiah had

explained that true worship was not a matter of shrines and altars, but was a matter of the right attitude of heart and mind, based on a proper understanding:

Thus says the Lord: "Heaven is My throne, and earth is My footstool. Where is the house that you will build Me? And where is the place of My rest? For all those things My hand has made, and all those things exist," Says the Lord. "But on this one will I look: on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word" (Isaiah 66:1–2).

So the apostle Paul explained to these Athenian philosophers that attitude matters more than altars. God made all things, in particular mankind, to seek God and to find Him, even though He is not far from any one of us. To support his argument he also quoted two Greek writers, firstly quoting words written by Epimenides of Crete: *"In him we live and move and have our being"* and then Aratus' poem "Phainomena" which said: *'For we are indeed his offspring.'*

Paul used the sort of logic which would appeal to the philosophers of Athens to establish that as we are all the offspring of God then it is wrong to think that the Lord God is an image made from gold, silver or stone. Luke has clearly only given us a précis of Paul's speech. For the words that have been recorded in Acts chapter 17 can be read through in a few minutes. But they must represent what Paul would take quite a long time to say before coming to the climax of his argument:

"Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by

the man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:30–31).

Repentance

This is the same message the Lord Jesus brought right at the start of his ministry when he said:

"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15).

Paul has an equally forthright message about the need to repent. It is necessary, indeed vital, because God has appointed a day on which He will judge the earth. In this way, Paul introduces the Athenians to the work of the Lord Jesus. The raising from the dead of Jesus is not only a well attested fact of history, but is also the assurance that the Lord God has given that He will judge the earth.

Paul probably did not expect a huge crowd of converts, knowing that most were present just out of idle curiosity. Many of his hearers did not feel any real need to change their lives and live a life following the Lord Jesus. Most dismissed what he said, mocking the idea of the resurrection, though others declared that they would like to hear him again.

Yet at least four were converted and believed. One was Dionysius the Areopagite, another a woman named Damaris, *"and others with them,"* though we are not told how many. Nor are we told whether Paul had opportunity to speak again to those who wanted more. Luke only tells us that Paul left Athens and went on to Corinth, where he had many more converts.

Mark Sheppard

“Red in the Morning”

There is a well known saying in the UK that seeks to foretell what tomorrow's weather will be like. It is based on a phenomenon that people have noticed from time immemorial and there is a certain amount of scientific proof that this is true. Here's the saying:

“Red in the night, shepherds' delight. Red in the morning, shepherds' warning!”

Sign from Heaven

Jesus referred to this type of weather forecasting when asked by the Pharisees and Sadducees to provide a sign from heaven that would verify his claims to be the Son of God.

“When it is evening you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red’; and in the morning, ‘It will be foul weather today, for the sky is red and threatening.’ Hypocrites! You know how to discern the face of the sky, but you cannot discern the signs of the times” (Matthew 16:2-3).

Jesus had already given them a sign to watch out for, the sign of the prophet Jonah:

For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. (Matthew 12:40).

You would think that all the miracles of healing Jesus had performed during his three year ministry would have been proof enough that he was indeed the Son of God. But no! They wanted another more dramatic sign to prove his divine power and that sign would be provided, whether they heeded it or not.

The indisputable proof that Jesus is the Son of God came with his resurrection from the dead. This is what Jesus was speaking about when he spoke of Jonah. As Jonah was inside the whale for three days and three nights so Jesus would be in the grave for three days and three nights and then be raised to life. When Jonah eventually went to Nineveh to preach, the inhabitants repented of their evil ways and were saved from God's impending judgement. What about the Jewish response? And what about ours?

World Unrest

Whether we look at the turmoil in the financial world, the problems of global warming, the unrest in the Middle East, the ever-growing world population, the increasing pollution of our environment, or the threat of terrorism – we know in our hearts that there is no human solution. Only God's intervention can solve these problems and end man's mismanagement of the world.

Jesus' return to the earth to establish God's rule in the world will bring about the end of all these problems and the establishment of the peace we all long for. The signs of the imminence of Jesus' promised return to the earth are all around us. Will our reaction be like that of the Pharisees and Sadducees who stubbornly refused to be convinced or like that of the Ninevites who listened and repented?

The lesson for us is crystal clear. Repent now before God's judgements are brought on the earth.

Marion Buckler

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