

Glad Tidings

OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

1566

Elephants Never Forget – page 3
The Rich Young Ruler – page 7
Is Jesus ‘God’? – page 10

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OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

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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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Contents

Elephants Never Forget...3

How Healthy is Your Heart?5

The Rich Young Ruler7

Is Jesus 'God'?.....10

Letters to the Philippians and Colossians13

**Jesus Shows Us the Way
.....16**

**Living like a King:
Jehoshaphat18**

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Elephants Never Forget

Elephants are the largest land mammals alive today and can live up to 60 years old. They have a huge 10½ pound (5 kilogram) brain and use it to identify other elephants and to survive. Each herd tends to have a matriarch – an older female – who acts as guardian and herd leader.

She can identify unfamiliar elephants and put the herd on the defensive, and when drought comes she can lead the herd to more fertile land or to reliable water, sometimes travelling over long distances to locations they have not visited for very many years. This capacity to recall information has spawned the saying that ‘an elephant never forgets’.

Remembering

It is sometimes said that everything we ever did and said is stored somewhere in our brains. The problem is that often we can't recall the information. Our brains are much smaller than an elephant's (about 3 pounds or 1.4 kilograms on average) but as the brain is the most complex organ in our bodies, with a staggering one hundred billion nerve cells, human intelligence far exceeds the survival skills of a matriarch elephant. Some people are able to train and develop their brains, so that they can remember the most amazing details, whilst others have a job to remember the simplest things.

It was like that in Bible times too. Some people had elephant-like powers of recall when it came to remembering the good things that God had done for them. Others made no effort to remember and lived in wilful ignorance

of God their Creator. Whilst some people exercised their minds and tuned in their perceptions by thinking about God, others thought about anything but the One who had given them the capacity to think things through.

Training the Mind

Many self-help manuals have been written encouraging people to train and develop their memories and there have been some brilliant success stories. There are people who can watch a pack of playing cards being dealt and then recall the sequence – 6 of hearts, 2 of spades, Jack of Clubs – and so on, right through the 52 card pack.

That's the sort of mind we have been given, if only we can develop it. At the other end of the memory spectrum there are people who have lost that capacity entirely and no longer even recall who they are, where they are, or what life is all about.

What we need to remember is why God gave us this mental capacity in the first place and what we should do with it while we still have it. Most certainly it was not given us so that we could remember a string of random numbers, or a pack of playing cards, impressive though that is.

Our brain was given us so that we could learn about God, understand His gracious purpose, and prepare our minds and hearts to praise Him and to serve Him, as well as we can. To fulfil that purpose we have to train our minds so that we think about Him and come to understand His ways and His love for each of us.

Don't Forget!

When God rescued the children of Israel from bitter slavery in Egypt and brought them into the wilderness, on the way to the Promised Land, He effected that exodus in spectacular fashion, with plagues and miracles that demonstrated His superiority over all the gods of Egypt. If we had been there, that demonstration of divine power would have been unforgettable. So it might come as a surprise to observe that in his last words to the children of Israel – known as the Book of Deuteronomy – Moses emphasised the danger of forgetting all about God and His works. Here's just a sample of what he said:

Only take heed to yourself, and diligently keep yourself, lest you forget the things your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life. And teach them to your children and your grandchildren (Deuteronomy 4:9);

Take heed to yourselves, lest you forget the covenant of the Lord your God which He made with you (4:23);

When you have eaten and are full—then beware, lest you forget the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage (6:11–12);

Beware that you do not forget the Lord your God by not keeping His commandments, His judgments, and His statutes which I command you today (8:11).

Remember, Remember!

To balance those warnings about the perils of forgetting, Moses urged his hearers to remember what God had

done for them. Fourteen times in Deuteronomy alone, Moses asked the nation to remember what had happened to them and to make that recollection the basis of their good behaviour in the land they were about to possess:

You shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this thing.. (Deuteronomy 24:18).

All this contains some instruction for us, because the Bible was written to help us get our lives right with God, not just so that we can see how others wasted their God-given opportunities. We were never slaves in Egypt; nor did God rescue us from there by signs and wonders.

But before we come to know Jesus Christ and to understand God's purpose centred in him, we need to realise that we are bondservants to sin and death. Bound to sin, because of the nature we have inherited from Adam, we will just cease to exist when we die unless we find out about God's rescue plan, understand it, and then remember it in all aspects of our life. Remember, and never forget it.

Jesus once said this to his disciples, a group who had travelled with him and had learned what sort of person he was. And these words could just as fittingly be addressed to us, who have seen God's hand at work in the world as His purpose draws towards its conclusion:

Having eyes, do you not see? And having ears, do you not hear? And do you not remember? (Mark 8:18).

Editor

How Healthy is Your Heart?

John had heart disease and needed an operation. His friends could hardly believe it. “You look so well, and you are always out with your little dog – are you sure you need treatment?” they asked. The medical tests were clear, however, and John had a life-saving operation. Afterwards he had to change his lifestyle, especially the food he ate. “This is not just a diet,” he said “It’s a new way of life.”



The Bible and the Heart

In the Bible the heart is described as the source of emotions and thoughts. Some religions teach that we all have good in us (even something of ‘God’ in us) which just needs nurturing. While this might be reassuring, it is totally contrary to the teaching of the Bible.

The prophet Jeremiah said:

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it? (Jeremiah 17:9).

Years later the Lord Jesus added:

Out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things which defile a man (Matthew 15:19,20).

These words are not describing criminals and unruly people, but all of us – even the most generous and selfless person we know. In our natural state Paul describes us as having “*no hope and without God in the world*” (Ephesians 2:12), and even “*enemies*” of God (Romans 5:10).

This is because there is a huge difference between mankind and

Almighty God, as the prophet explains:

“My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,” says the Lord. “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8–9).

We may seem ‘nice’ on the outside but, like John with heart disease, our true situation is very serious. Left to ourselves and in our natural state we will perish, or cease to exist.

The Solution

In His great mercy, God has provided a way for us to be saved from destruction. This was achieved by the death of His only Son, Jesus. But action is needed on our part. First of all we need to believe what the Bible says both about our sins and about the meaning and relevance of the sacrifice of Christ. We need to be baptised (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38).

By being completely immersed in water we associate ourselves with the death of Jesus Christ. As we come out of the water we rise to a ‘new life’ – a

life with completely different standards. In Biblical language, we will then have a 'new heart'. The Bible describes it in this way:

Do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we were buried with him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of his death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of his resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin (Romans 6:3–6).

A New Focus

This new life has Christ as its key focus. Jesus demands our full attention and asks us to love him first and foremost. In his own words:

He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. And he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after me is not worthy of me (Matthew 10:37–38).

This involves trying to live as Jesus lived, and he set a very high standard and asks a lot of us, including:

... love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust (Matthew 5:44–45).

To live like that is alien to our natural instincts. But this is what God is like and He wants us to aspire to these standards if we wish to partake of 'divine nature' in the life to come, when Jesus returns from heaven (2 Peter 1:4). It is certain that we shall all fail, but we must try and, as disciples, when we fail the good news is that we can be forgiven (1 John 1:9)

Moreover, if we try to be faithful we are assured of the unfailing love of Jesus, as the apostle Paul explains:

I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38–39).

These words are a great comfort, but they do not and cannot apply to all people – only to those who are obedient to the call of the gospel.

What about You?

Every day someone is diagnosed with a life-threatening illness of which they were previously unaware. We know what the Bible teaches and so we know that in our natural state our hearts are unacceptable to God and we are in a critical condition. The matter is urgent. The apostle Paul once explained that God "commands all men everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30). That word 'command' is very strong – it gives us no leeway. But God is asking us to turn to Him so that we can be saved from complete destruction. He wants us to be saved and we would be foolish to ignore that invitation, wouldn't we?

Anna Hart

The Rich Young Ruler

Now behold, one came and said to (Jesus), “Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?” So he said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments.” He said to him, “Which ones?” Jesus said, “ ‘You shall not murder,’ ‘You shall not commit adultery,’ ‘You shall not steal,’ ‘You shall not bear false witness,’ ‘Honour your father and your mother,’ and, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ ” The young man said to him, “All these things I have kept from my youth. What do I still lack?” Jesus said to him, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions (Matthew 19:16–22).

Have you ever wondered about this encounter between the rich young ruler (Luke 18:18) and the Lord Jesus? The meeting between the two men was brief. The recorded account could only have lasted a few minutes, although it may be the case that the nameless young man had been listening to Jesus, thus prompting his question:

“Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?” (Matthew 19:16).

Jesus’ answer and the ruler’s saddened withdrawal from the scene evokes in us two responses:

- ❖ What a pity that he did not recognise what had been offered to him by the Lord, and
- ❖ Our hindsight appreciation that all his material possessions would be lost in the events of the AD70 destruction of Judea and Jerusalem, although it is possible that he didn’t live to see the worst of that destruction.

Three Things

The meeting between the two men raises some interesting issues. We know three things about the ruler. (1) The man was young, (2) he was a ruler and (3) he was very rich. The first two facts indicate that he was probably about twenty-five or thirty years old and, given that he was a ruler, he was probably from an influential family.

The time and location of the meeting are also significant. *“Judea beyond Jordan”* (Matthew 19:1), just before Jesus’ final journey to Jerusalem.

The encounter does not appear to have occurred in any of the main



towns or cities and after the meeting Jesus goes to Jerusalem via Jericho. So where had the young man come from? He may have been a member of the Pharisees' party from Jerusalem, the group whose questions were designed to entrap Jesus. But possibly, and more interestingly, he may have come from Jericho. This is a place which, elsewhere in Scripture, has strong connections with sin and those who oppose God.

Rich or Poor?

What did the Lord Jesus and the young man see when they faced each other? To outward appearances the rich young ruler had reached the pinnacle of human achievement. Youth and strength, wealth to employ to make his life comfortable and worthwhile, and the righteousness that could be achieved under the Law of Moses to influence and direct the lives of others. As a ruler he doubtless also had political power either locally or even further afield.

The Lord Jesus on the other hand was materially poor, was not overtly a ruler and had no political authority, in spite of his huge social and religious influence. Possibly these men saw their alter egos. Jesus may have recognised what he might temporarily have become had he succumbed to the temptation to misuse his Father's powers. Perhaps, seeing the success of the young man, it still was a temptation to achieve some of his goals by material means.

The young man saw someone who had high ideals and principles but seemed unable or unwilling to apply them politically. Perhaps he saw a dreamer rather than a practical man of action. This is not to disparage the ideals of the young man. Jesus never

questioned his claim to have kept the law from "my youth up"; so he was a good-living young man.

Poles Apart

The backgrounds of the two men were totally dissimilar. The young ruler had grown up with and was accustomed to material well-being. There had been stability in his life and he would have also had the benefits of a sound Jewish formal education. Traditionally Jewish boys were taught a trade as well as being given academic and theological training, possibly this man's trade was to be a "ruler" – perhaps in the synagogue rather than in politics as such, given that the Romans were the ruling power.

Jesus' background appeared to be at the opposite end of the spectrum. He was born into poverty, grew up far from the capital city, was persecuted by politicians shortly after his birth, and for most of the first thirty years of his life lived in a small village in a region despised by the elite. His stepfather



was a carpenter and it is probable that Jesus too worked in this trade as he helped to support his parents in keeping a large family living in a subsistence economy.

Common Ground?

Did these two men have much in common? Their ages were probably similar and their religious or theological educations were both extensive, though it may be confidently assumed that Jesus had a more profound insight, leading to a deeper and more extensive understanding.

Where they differed vastly was that the young ruler lacked the confidence to trust in God, rather than relying upon the traditions he had been taught. Jesus put all his faith in his Father's ability to fulfil His will. Believing implicitly what God had revealed, Jesus knew that one day he would be a King and a Priest – for he was the Messiah.

Looked at from that viewpoint, the Lord Jesus had everything and the young man only enjoyed fleeting and short-lived success. He failed to see the need for the life of faith and repentance that Jesus offered when he told him to sell his possessions and give to the poor. He had put his trust in the material blessings he had received and not in the giver of the blessings. He saw riches as permanent and not as a bubble which could burst at any moment. This is a profound lesson for the modern materially-blessed follower of Jesus.

The Lord Jesus, on the other hand, in spite of appearances, had everything: the love and care of his heavenly Father which would support him through all the traumas of his mortal existence. At his resurrection he was to

be given *“all authority ... in heaven and earth”* (Matthew 28:18).

Brief Encounter

Even with their differences, it is recorded that on seeing the young man Jesus loved him. Evidently there was an instant rapport, although we don't have evidence of the young man's feelings about Jesus. No one was ever the same after a meeting with the Lord. It seems that Jesus saw important and valuable characteristics in him which he was anxious to develop.

So what of the outcome of this encounter? The young ruler left sad and disappointed and maybe Jesus did too, for he loved him and knew exactly what was to happen in Israel, within the next 30–40 years. When Rome made its move, the young ruler would be deposed one way or another whilst Jesus would go on to become the one whom God would authorise to control all life and all outcomes.

We have no way of knowing what happened to the rich young ruler. It would be nice to think that he finally understood what Jesus was offering and returned to show faith, trust and confidence in the true young ruler of all.

We also have choices to make. As we encounter Jesus, by reading about him and learning from him, we need to see beyond mere appearances to perceive the truth of who he is and the offer of salvation that he now extends to us – whether rich or poor. That challenge is as great today as it was two thousand years ago. Ask yourself: “In what do you really trust?”

Cynthia Miles

Is Jesus 'God'?

*Much confusion exists about the true relationship of Jesus and his Father. Was he, as some people think, part of a Trinity (of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit)? Or was he the Son of God, who came into existence when he was born by God's Holy Spirit power acting upon the virgin Mary? In this article, **John Carter** looks carefully at the Bible usage when someone is said to be "a god". His conclusions may surprise you.*

Jesus is Called 'God'

Because Jesus has, by inheritance, "obtained a more excellent name than (the angels)" (Hebrews 1:4), we should not be surprised if, after the style of description used in connection with angels, he is called "God".

In order to understand this clearly, and to avoid confusion, we need to look at Bible terminology and we start our examination in the Old Testament.

When God gave Israel laws, he made proper arrangements for the administration of justice which required the appointment of judges. Thus:

- ❖ If a slave decided he wanted to accept life servitude with his master, he was to make that arrangement before the judges (Exodus 21:6), or
- ❖ If someone was found stealing, he or she was to be brought before the judges, in much the same way that theft is dealt with today (Exodus 22:8).

In both instances the judges are described by the Hebrew word "elohim", a designation that is also given to the angels, and sometimes to God Himself, who is, of course, the judge of all mankind. Thus many modern versions speak of the slave and the thief being brought before God

(not before the judge). From this we can see that the rulers of Israel were called 'gods' for they were acting on God's behalf when making their judgments, and administering His law. The nation was a theocracy – a nation governed by God through deputies – and because these rulers in this kingdom of Israel were God's representatives ruling over His kingdom, the word "god" is applied to the mortal rulers of the Kingdom of God.

Vivid Prophecy

The Psalms are Israel's hymn book or books, but they were much more than that. Some of them are vivid prophecies portraying the life of Jesus. Psalm 22, for example, depicts his crucifixion in startling detail, even though that form of capital punishment was not practised at the time David penned that psalm. Read Psalm 82 and you will find a vivid portrayal of the Lord's contentions with the contemporary rulers of Israel:

God stands in the congregation of the mighty; He judges among the gods. How long will you judge unjustly, and show partiality to the wicked? Defend the poor and fatherless; do justice to the afflicted and needy. Deliver the poor and needy; free them from the hand of the wicked (Psalm 82:1–4).

Here God is rebuking the gods of Israel, the mortal rulers, and reproves them because they are showing favour to wicked people and are ignoring the needs of the defenceless. The Psalmist reminds them of their exalted status as rulers appointed by God:

I said, "You are gods, and all of you are children of the Most High. But you shall die like men, and fall like one of the princes" (Psalm 82:6–7).

Sharp Contention

If there is any doubt in your mind about the validity of this line of argument, consider how the Lord Jesus referred to this very Psalm. The Jewish leaders were about to stone him because he told them that he was the Son of God. For them, such a claim was tantamount to claiming to be God Himself, so they accused Jesus of blasphemy. Look how Jesus responded and note his mastery of the Scriptures:

Jesus answered them, "Is it not written in your law, 'I said, "You are gods" "? If He called them gods, to whom the word of God came (and the Scripture cannot be broken), do you say of him whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the Son of God'?" (John 10:34–36).

Jesus was quoting this very Psalm, and construed it as a prophecy of himself in the company of those whom God had appointed to rule His people (the very Jewish elders who now wanted to stone him). His argument was that as they were called 'gods' because of the delegated authority given them by God, how could they accuse him of blasphemy when he was merely stating that he was God's Son.



Psalm 45 is about a king's marriage and the bride's preparation.

Another Psalm

Psalm 45 is another prophecy about the Lord Jesus, one which is yet to be fulfilled. It depicts the time when Jesus will return to earth as King and will call to him all those who are his people, from the present and the past, so they can be together forever. This scene is described as 'the marriage supper of the Lamb' in Revelation chapter 19:6–9. In the Psalm, Jesus is addressed thus:

Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; a scepter of righteousness is the scepter of your kingdom. You love righteousness and hate wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness more than your companions (Psalm 45:6–7).

Notice that whilst the King, about whom the Psalm is written, is called "God", he is clearly subordinate to the One who has blessed him (45:2) and anointed him (45:7). Should you have any doubt about the relevance of this terminology to the Lord Jesus and his filial relationship to his Father, notice that this Psalm is also referred to in the New Testament, this time in the Letter to the Hebrews, where the writer is seeking to establish that Jesus is the Son of God:

And of the angels He says: “Who makes His angels spirits and His ministers a flame of fire.” But to the Son He says: “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; a scepter of righteousness is the scepter of your kingdom” (Hebrews 1:7–8).

God Manifest

There is a prophecy concerning God-manifestation in Isaiah chapter 64 which is very interesting, when the prophet utters this prayer:

*Oh, that You would rend the heavens!
That You would come down! That the mountains might shake at Your presence – As fire burns brushwood, as fire causes water to boil – to make Your name known to Your adversaries, that the nations may tremble at Your presence! (Isaiah 64:1–2).*

This language is reminiscent of what happened at Mount Sinai when there was a manifestation of God through angelic beings; and this is an appeal that there should be another manifestation of God. Through whom is this manifestation to take place this time? Through angels, or through someone else? And what is indicated by the words “That the mountains might shake at Your presence”? Whose presence is it for whom the prophet prays?

The one in whom that Divine “presence” will be manifested is now addressed:

For since the beginning of the world men have not heard nor perceived by the ear, nor has the eye seen any God besides you, who acts for the one who waits for Him (Isaiah 64:4).

Here the prophet is describing one who alone saw what God had prepared and the one who had that discernment is once again addressed as “God”.

Not Understanding

Writing to the Corinthians, Paul applies the passage to the rulers of his day, who did not understand God’s purpose, and who crucified the Lord of Glory. But the followers of Christ did not share the ignorance of the rulers, hence Paul can quote the Isaiah passage and then add:

But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God (1 Corinthians 2:10).

The followers of Christ share the understanding of the Head, the Lord Jesus, who is called “God” in Isaiah’s message, and who clearly and unerringly saw what God had prepared, and who endured the cross and despised the shame for the joy that was set before him.

So, if the rulers of Israel in this Divine usage of language are called ‘gods’, we should seek a right appreciation of this usage, and recognize that the Lord Jesus was so addressed, because of his unique status as the Son of God.

John Carter

To be continued

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Letters to the Philippians and Colossians

Philippians

This letter is a tender one, for Paul had a warm friendship with the group at Philippi. It is another letter from prison, probably written towards the end of the “two whole years” he spent in Rome (Acts 28:30), for he is confident of release. It is a ‘thank you’ letter.

The Philippians knew the apostle was deprived of liberty and everyday comforts. They had put their heads together and made up a present for him, carried to Rome by Epaphroditus, one of their members. Now he was returning, and Paul wrote a letter for him to take back. We must imagine it being read aloud to a packed assembly of the congregation, probably on a Sunday, and we can anticipate their keen faces as they listened to the news from Paul’s prison cell.

For the Best

Remarkably the apostle told them that good had come from his imprisonment. Every soldier on duty guarding the apostle had come to know he was in chains for the sake of Jesus of Nazareth, and some of the Imperial Guard had actually become Christians as a result. Paul’s energy in preaching in prison had rubbed off onto the Roman brothers and sisters, who had been stirred by his example. We cannot help feeling shamed, too, when we see this amazing man, so dedicated to his Lord that even when he has to stop his journeys through the machinations of his enemies, he

refused to sit in a corner and mope. Every person that came through the door of his cell was a potential disciple. He must save them from eternal death.

The second chapter draws a brilliant analogy between Adam and Christ. Paul is teaching us to submerge our natural pride, and do always what will help others. Jesus, he tells us, must be our example. Although Jesus had the same physical form as Adam, unlike Adam – who grasped at the forbidden fruit in the hope it could make him like God – Jesus did not break God’s law.



Though born to be King of kings, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but accepted the humble role of being a servant to his fellow men. Adam found himself condemned to death. Jesus, by contrast, will for his humility be blessed with a name above every name.

Paul’s Dedication

Paul informs the Philippians he will send Timothy to them as soon as he hears the outcome of his case, hoping

he himself will follow. But now he must return to them their messenger Epaphroditus. At this point a little drama appears. Evidently this poor brother had been taken ill in Rome, and came close to death, causing Paul grave concern. But God had mercifully granted him recovery, and now he was coming back, bearing the letter.

From a human point of view Paul the ambitious young lawyer had wasted his life, enduring years of persecution as a Christian, and shut up in jail. But he had cheerfully abandoned his past career in exchange for the tremendous reward of coming to know Jesus his master. His goal was no longer fame and fortune, but the resurrection from the dead. He felt as dedicated as an athlete in a race, determined to win the wreath of victory:

Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but 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).



Finally, in the last chapter he gets round to the reason for his letter. It was really kind of them to think of him,

he says. He had learned to accept privations and discomfort. But their gift was appreciated, and he was sure God would reward them for their thoughtfulness. We do not know what they sent him. Was it blankets, and fruit cake, or hand-knitted jumpers and writing paper? We cannot know. But his reaction shows what a difference a thoughtful gesture can make to someone who is in trouble.

Colossians

This is another letter in the ‘prison’ series, and from its similarity to the Ephesian epistle may have been written at about the same time. The readership, however, was very different. Colossae in the first century was a small town 120 miles (200 km) east of Ephesus, and overshadowed by nearby Laodicea. The apostle had not visited Colossae during his travels. How, then, had the gospel come to this town?

The answer appears in the first chapter, where Paul commends his fellow worker Epaphras. It was from him, he says, the Colossian brothers and sisters had learned the gospel. Presumably Epaphras had heard Paul preach, perhaps during a business trip to Ephesus, and had been baptised. On his return he vigorously set about telling his friends the good news, and a new church had been formed. So Paul was writing to people he had not met face to face.

Under Attack

Since Epaphras sends his greetings with the letter (Colossians 4:12), it seems he was currently with Paul in Rome. And the reason for writing the letter was that Epaphras had brought disturbing news. The infant ecclesia was being attacked by a new philosophy. Reading between the lines, we

can see that there were two ideas circulating in Colossae – first, that Jesus was not very important, and second, that we must afflict our bodies if we want to be saved.

Paul weighs in on the first error with some vehemence. Jesus, he declares, is God's firstborn. He was not born first: Adam was. And Adam was lord over the first Creation. But Adam sinned. So God has elevated Jesus (like Isaac over Ishmael in the Old Testament, and Jacob over Esau) to be lord over a new Creation, not of animals and plants, but of holy people, reconciled to God through his blood.

He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things he may have the preeminence. For it pleased the Father that in him all the fullness should dwell, and by him to reconcile all things to himself, by him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of his cross (Colossians 1:18–20).

Stand Firm!

As he did with the Galatians, Paul insists that they must stick to the gospel they have heard, and not shift from it (Colossians 1:23). There is no place for additions. This is a salutary warning to us, for many religious leaders over the centuries have claimed to have new revelations from God which contradict the teaching of the apostles.

The second error was more subtle – the idea that we need strict rules about what to eat and what to avoid, and to make certain days of the year special. This was a Greek version of the rule-book approach of the Jewish law-keepers. The apostle is emphatic –

Christians are not bound to observe the Sabbath or to avoid pork. That approach satisfies the human desire to appear righteous, but does not change the heart (see Colossians 2:16–22).

This is an important point in our day, when there is such an emphasis on creating a perfect body by diets and surgery and cosmetics. The body will perish. It is our mind that will decide our eternal future. Jesus crucified the body, and we must put to death the desires of the flesh, not just the gross sins of immorality and covetousness, but anger, too, and malice and lies. As in Ephesians (see Issue 1565), Paul has two coats, one to take off and another to put on, and the new coat represents kindness, compassion and forgiveness. The belt that holds it on is love (Colossians 3:12–14).

The letter concludes with the three categories of advice given by the apostle in Ephesians – to husbands and wives, children and parents, masters and slaves; and a list of greetings and instructions. Among these is the request that this letter be passed on to the brothers and sisters at Laodicea, and that they should read the (unpreserved) letter to Laodicea (Colossians 4:16).

This shows that Paul's letters were intended to be circulated and read by their initial recipients and, of course, by us. For the advice and counsel they contain is not just from the apostle Paul. These are letters that Paul wrote when he was inspired by God to give advice which stands the test of time and is equally helpful to us, although the circumstances we face are quite different.

David M Pearce

Jesus Shows Us the Way

*God has provided a way for us to return to Him and be forgiven, but we could never find this way unaided. Fortunately Jesus shows us this way, as **John Woodall** now explains.*

A Unique Life

The life of Jesus was amazing! He was born into the family of a carpenter and builder who lived in the north of the land of Israel – a little town called Nazareth. People didn't think much of Nazareth; they said:

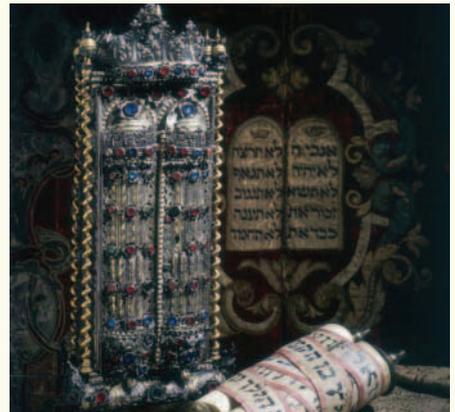
"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46).

Jesus must have followed Joseph into the family business because the neighbours also called Jesus 'the carpenter'. To their astonishment, when he was about thirty years of age, he left that job and began to teach publicly in a way that was fresh and full of authority. And he went about doing marvellous things and showing remarkable acts of kindness. Just think of their reaction when one Sabbath he returned home and went to the local synagogue:

Many hearing him were astonished, saying, "Where did this man get these things? And what wisdom is this which is given to him, that such mighty works are performed by his hands! Is this not the carpenter, the son of Mary, and brother of James, Joses, Judas, and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?" So they were offended at him. But Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honour except in his own country, among his own relatives, and in his own house" (Mark 6:2-4).

Jesus died when he was only about thirty-three years old, and only three of those years were lived in public. He never built a monument, led an army, wrote a book or left any written record and yet he has made a bigger impression on the world than any other person in history.

As we have said before, many of the things done in his name (like the so-called 'Christian Crusades' in the Middle Ages) are disgraceful and are totally against the teaching of Jesus himself. Even today more people claim to be Christians than to be followers of any other religion. Islam also, although it is a different religion, accepts Jesus as a prophet of God. Indeed, the Quran accepts that Jesus brought dead people to life again (Sura 3:50; 5:110) and it records that God "lifted him up to Himself" (Sura 3:51-58; 4:158). So for Muslims also, Jesus is unique.



Perfect Life

The Bible goes further even than this. It tells us that Jesus lived a perfect life – the only human ever to do so. As a child we read that, “*Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and men*” (Luke 2:52).

- ❖ In his adult life, we are told that he was: “in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15).
- ❖ Throughout his public life Jesus was spied on by powerful men who hated him for the way he exposed their hypocrisy and selfishness. They tried all ways to catch him out and to trip him up. They were every bit as persistent as our present day investigative journalists.

Jesus was never caught doing or saying anything wrong. After they had watched him for a couple of years, Jesus challenged them: “*Which of you convicts me of sin?*” (John 8:46). No-one answered, for nobody could. Jesus is still unique because, although his enemies killed him, he was raised to eternal life by the power of God and is alive today, guiding and directing the angels to bring about the circumstances that will lead to his return to establish God’s kingdom on earth.

Alive for Ever

About six weeks after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the apostle Peter accused his fellow-countrymen in Jerusalem of having:

... denied the Holy One and the Just, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and killed the Prince of life, whom God raised from the dead, of which we are witnesses (Acts 3:14–15).

But it was not just an accusation, for he continued with this offer:

Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that He may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before (Acts 3:19–20).

The response of the crowd was amazing for many who heard Peter’s words believed the offer of salvation and about 5000 men were baptised, there and then (Acts 4:4).

The Good News Spreads

Most of those new Christians were Jews, and as the apostles travelled further into the Roman Empire with the good news about Jesus they usually preached first in the synagogues. Before long, however, Gentiles (non-Jews) were given the opportunity to accept Jesus as their saviour sent by God, on the same terms, and they were often more responsive.

When some Jews in Central Turkey were not interested, the apostles announced: “*behold, we turn to the Gentiles*” (Acts 13:46). In this way the gospel spread and now we have the same opportunity – whether we live in the Middle East, Europe, or anywhere else in the world.

Our next question has to be – ‘How did it come about that Jesus was and is such an amazing person?’ After thousands of years of sin and failure, just one person got everything right. He succeeded where everyone else had failed and the good news is that his success can be our success too, as we shall see.

John Woodall

Jehoshaphat

Some men seem instinctively to follow a good course in life. Jehoshaphat the fourth king of Judah, after it separated from Israel, was like that. He was thirty-five years old when he became king on the death of his father Asa, in 878BC, and reigned for twenty-five years.

During his reign Judah was prosperous and he set an example of godliness. When his reign began he was clearly troubled about the northern border of Judah, so he increased the number of troops in his fortified cities. There is a little comment about why God was with him:

Now the Lord was with Jehoshaphat, because he walked in the former ways of his father David; he did not seek the Baals, but sought the God of his father, and walked in His commandments and not according to the acts of Israel (2 Chronicles 17:3-4).

Trusting God

It was a simple lesson which he learned from his ancestor, that kings who trust in God are much more likely to prosper than those who ignore him. Thus, by comparison with kings who had gone their own way, we read that:

The Lord established the kingdom in his hand; and all Judah gave presents to Jehoshaphat, and he had riches and honour in abundance (2 Chronicles 17:5).

Jehoshaphat soon began to try and improve the moral tone of the kingdom by removing the high places used for

idol worship and the wooden images. As the making of idols was strictly forbidden by God, Jehoshaphat hoped that the people would now focus on the worship of the one true God. Nor did he just remove the symbols of false religious worship. He actively sought to teach his nation about the Law of God (2 Chronicles 17:7-9). This was just as it should have been. Israel's first great leader, Moses, had spoken about this to the people just before they entered the Promised Land after their long wilderness journey:

Only take heed to yourself, and diligently keep yourself, lest you forget the things your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life. And teach them to your children and your grandchildren (Deuteronomy 4:9).

Godliness

In this way the king ensured that the whole population was fully aware of all that God wanted of His people. Jehoshaphat ruled over a kingdom which was likely to be godly and prosperous. Later in his reign he began to organise his administration more closely.

He had almost lost his life in an alliance with Ahab, the king of Israel. They had gone to war and Jehoshaphat had nearly been killed in battle when Ahab lost his life. So the Lord God sent his prophet Jehu to warn Jehoshaphat about the dangers of such alliances:

Should you help the wicked and love those who hate the Lord? Therefore

the wrath of the Lord is upon you (2 Chronicles 19:2).

It was a further warning to separate from evil, whereupon Jehoshaphat heeded the warning and took the opportunity to reinforce the administration of his realm. He appointed judges and sent them to all parts of the land, giving them clear guidelines about the way they should act, saying:

“Take heed to what you are doing, for you do not judge for man but for the Lord, who is with you in the judgment. Now therefore, let the fear of the Lord be upon you; take care and do it, for there is no iniquity with the Lord our God, no partiality, nor taking of bribes” (2 Chronicles 19:6–7).

This was a high standard, but it was essential that the new approach began correctly. The re-organisation did not end there; others were appointed to act in the capital city of Jerusalem. The king gave them similar instructions.

“Thus you shall act in the fear of the Lord, faithfully and with a loyal heart ... you shall warn them, lest they trespass against the Lord and wrath come upon you and your brethren. Do this, and you will not be guilty” (2 Chronicles 19:9–10).

Again this was a high standard. The final injunction was to: *“Behave courageously, and the LORD will be with the good” (v11).*

Helped by God

All this stood Jehoshaphat in good stead a little later in his reign. A confederacy from Moab and Ammon set out to conquer the nation of Judah and the size of their army was enough to make anyone afraid. Rightly used, fear can be very positive and Jehoshaphat’s

fear took him to the Temple where he prayed to God, for we read that:

“Jehoshaphat feared, and set himself to seek the LORD, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah” (2 Chronicles 20:3).

The king’s prayer was answered by the prophet Jahaziel thus:

“Do not be afraid nor dismayed because of this great multitude, for the battle is not yours, but God’s” (2 Chronicles 20:15).

The next morning, they went as if going to battle, but they did not need their weapons. The king appointed a group to sing praise to God.

“Praise the Lord, for His mercy endures forever” (v21).

These words echoed the words of David in Psalms 29, 105 and 106 and the prayers and praises had a remarkable effect. God ambushed those who came against Judah, so that the opposing army was defeated. The confederacy of Moab and Ammon was no more. Again, guided by the king, Judah did not forget to give thanks and praise to God for His salvation. There is a final comment about this:

And the fear of God was on all the kingdoms of those countries when they heard that the Lord had fought against the enemies of Israel. Then the realm of Jehoshaphat was quiet, for his God gave him rest all around (2 Chronicles 20:29–30).

There’s an important lesson in all this for us. Jehoshaphat had put his trust in God, and because of that was blessed. If we act in the same way and follow his faithful example, a blessing awaits us too.

Mark Sheppard

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