

Glad Tidings

Of The Kingdom Of God



Featured **Articles**

Reading for Life (p.3)

Death of an Empress (p.8)

Forgiveness (p.16)

A monthly magazine written and 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 mankind; 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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Reading for Life

HAVE you ever considered how fortunate you are, to be able to read this magazine? That is not intended as a boast – although we hope *Glad Tidings* is helpful – but to highlight how great it is, to be able to read.

It means we can learn, develop ourselves or simply get pleasure from books and other written material. Some of us can immerse ourselves in other worlds, or escape the pressures of this one, in this way.

Being able to read helps our learning as a child, increases our ability to study and gain qualifications in whatever field we choose, and affords better job prospects. In fact, literacy agencies have linked illiteracy with poor mental health, social deprivation and even shorter life expectancy. This is why so many countries around the world have made it a priority to teach children to read – both for learning and for pleasure.

Literacy has been on the increase, especially in the last hundred years, and UNESCO now estimates 90% of men and 83% of women in the world can read. Despite the obvious inequality, this shows great progress. 200 years ago, the proportions were inverted, and barely 15% of the world could read.

What to Read?

Reading is generally a good thing, but of course **what** we read is really important.

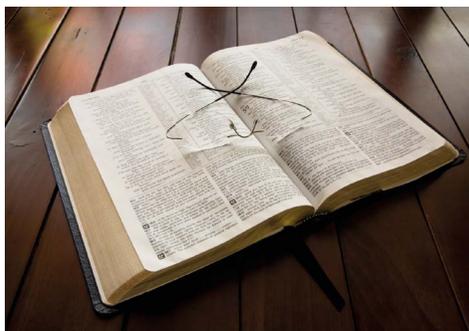
There are plenty of books and internet content which are very unhelpful and can damage our well-being. Choosing wisely is vital.

The Bible is a first-class choice for reading, in so many ways. If we like action stories, then the books of Judges and Acts provide lots of excitement. For advice and self-help, then Proverbs and Ecclesiastes have guidance that remains valid today. If you like poetry, then the Psalms provide all the emotional highs and lows that you could want. For character studies, the Gospel accounts of the life of Jesus are unsurpassed. The list goes on.

But the Bible is different, because none of its 66 books are fiction. The stories are real and the messages it contains are meaningful. Above all this, the Bible's single author is God; the people who wrote it down were doing so under His inspiration. There is plenty of evidence for this – prophecies which have been fulfilled, and scientific and other knowledge which could have come from no other source, to name but a few. *Glad Tidings* regularly deals with this evidence.

The impact of this is amazing. Look how the Psalmist put it:

Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day. You, through Your commandments, make me wiser than my enemies; for they



are ever with me. I have more understanding than all my teachers, for Your testimonies are my meditation. I understand more than the ancients, because I keep Your precepts (Psalm 119:97-100).

Reading and meditating on God's word – recorded in the Bible – gave him wisdom and knowledge beyond his peers.

Life-Giving Words

The writer continued, explaining how his adherence to God's word gave him great spiritual advantages too.

I have restrained my feet from every evil way, that I may keep Your word. I have not departed from Your judgments, for You Yourself have taught me. How sweet are Your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! Through Your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way. Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path (v101-105).

After thinking about God's word, he was able to please God better, to obey His laws and to avoid doing things that would displease God. This clearly gave him great

pleasure. God promises a wonderful future to those who love His word and try to please Him.

This was the message that the apostle Paul wrote to a young man who was trying to please God:

From childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. 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 3:15-17).

The Bible gives us everything we need to make us spiritually complete, equipped to please God. It teaches us about faith, the belief that through Jesus we can be 'saved' – brought into a relationship with God with the prospect of sharing the future He has planned. Jesus summarised it like this:

Your word is truth (John 17:17).

Words into Action

Now none of this is any use to us if we leave the words on the page and do not act upon what we read. The future Kingdom of God will be a real, perfect world, here on earth, where we can live in peace and joy for ever.

This means we need to take real steps based on what we read. Believe God. Be baptised. Live as His people, trying to please Him. That is how reading God's word can get us eternal life!

A Man Loved By God

DAVID was a man who possessed many qualities that God wanted in a king. This faithful man was Israel's greatest king and an ancestor of Jesus Christ. He is described like this by God:

I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after My own heart, who will do all My will (Acts 13:22).

Preparation

David's early life was excellent preparation for becoming a king. As shepherd to his father's sheep, he had to learn responsibility for a flock that was not his own. He had to care for the sheep and do what his father wanted with them. This would prepare him for taking care of Israel, the 'flock' or people of God. It was also during these years as a shepherd that he learned to have faith in God.

When a lion or a bear came and took a lamb out of the flock, I went out after it and struck it, and delivered the lamb from its mouth; and when it arose against me, I caught it by its beard, and struck and killed it... The LORD... delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear (1 Samuel 17:3-37).

Coming to the throne was not an easy time for David. He was hunted for many years by his predecessor and he had to flee for his life many times. He was brought time and time again to the depths of despair, but he found prayer to be a constant strength. We

can read some of these prayers in Psalms 34 and 52.

This time of trial was another necessary part of the development of one of the Bible's greatest characters. By the time David came to the throne he had firmly established a wonderful trust in and relationship to God.

A Godly King?

The reign of David shows in many ways how God's coming kingdom will be. David ruled on God's behalf, trying to lead the people so that they would obey and please God. He built the fragmented people of Israel into a united kingdom. The enemies of God were subdued and the nations around were brought into submission.

David appointed people to sing and play music to praise God at all hours of the day. He gathered the materials and prepared extensive plans for the building of a glorious temple for God. In all of this he was guided by God, and Samuel, His prophet. This example of noble government will be surpassed only by Christ's kingdom.

He did however commit two serious crimes and sins against God. He committed adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of one of his greatest warriors. When she became pregnant, he murdered Uriah, her husband, in a failed attempt to cover up the first offence.

God's Forgiveness

It may be hard to understand why God pardoned David these two sins, which under God's law were punishable by death. By forgiving him, God showed that He is, and always has been, a merciful God. It is important to note that David both repented and confessed his sins:

So David said to Nathan [the Prophet], "I have sinned against the LORD." And Nathan said to David, "The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die" (2 Samuel 12:13).

God's forgiveness can be a wonderful comfort, because everyone disobeys God in either small or big things. However, if we are trying to the best of our ability to please Him, and if we ask God for forgiveness, He is willing to forgive.

This did not mean that David did not have to face the consequences of his sin. He lost the respect and friendship of many of the people around him. It even led to members of his family being killed. For the rest of his life he suffered terrible shame and remorse for the things which could never be undone.

David's Response

As we saw above, David was quick to confess his sins and to seek forgiveness. Throughout his life, he recognised God's goodness and justice, and tried to please Him.

Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the multitude of Your tender mercies, blot out

my transgressions... For I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin is always before me... Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me... I will teach transgressors Your ways, and sinners shall be converted to You (Psalm 51:1, 3, 10, 13).

This is a great lesson for us. No matter what we have done we can always put it behind us and try to do better. If we fail, we've just got to get up and carry on, knowing that God wants us to succeed and will help us all He can along the way. The Psalms of David can be very encouraging to read, whatever our situation.

Character

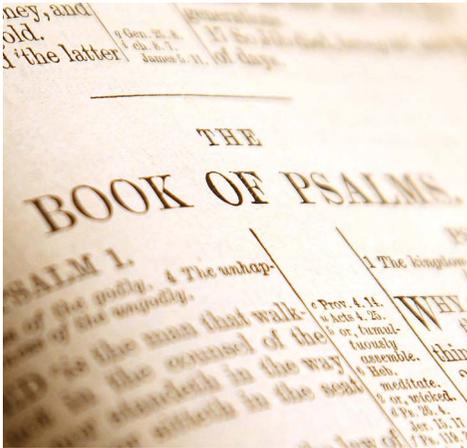
So, what made David a man after God's own heart? Firstly, he had an understanding of kingly duty:

He who rules over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God (2 Samuel 23:3).

Despite his faults, David did try to rule like this and was greatly blessed by God. He lived in harmony with priests and prophets and did not oppress his people but gave them freedom and led worship under God's law.

David was also very humble. His kingdom grew until it was comparable to Egypt or Assyria. Yet he was not arrogant about this, but attributed his successes to God.

Nor did he tax the people in order to live in luxury as his son would later do. His people loved him, and David always remembered that he was only a shepherd for God's flock.



He studied and loved God's word more than any other king after him. He modelled his life on what God had revealed in the law, not only spending time to learn the commandments but also to think about the spirit behind them. He tried to model his reign on God's law which was the secret of its success. Two Psalms which show his great love for God's word are Psalm 19 and Psalm 119.

It is little wonder then that God made great promises to David and made known to him His glorious plans for the future, when David's own descendant would reign for ever over God's flock in that glorious kingdom.

Lessons for Us

Let's consider four things we can learn from David's life.

1. The different situations of life can provide tremendous training, teaching us how to trust God and to build a

relationship with Him. These may be opportunities or difficulties: both can shape characters that will please God.

2. There is great value in considering ourselves as God's servants and trying our hardest to do what He asks, no matter what difficulties we face. Jesus himself considered himself to be a servant: "*For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many*" (Mark 10:45).
3. God is willing and eager to forgive our sins, if we confess them and ask for His forgiveness. This also needs repentance (a change of direction) with the commitment to try to do better. Although sins may be forgiven, we may not escape punishment for them, and the retribution will most likely be the consequences of our own actions.
4. We need God's guidance in our lives, and so prayer to Him should not merely be to request His help in times of trouble but also to thank and praise Him for His goodness to us. David's Psalms provide wonderful examples of this.

Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered... Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, you righteous (Psalm 32:1, 11).

David was a man greatly loved by God: that certainly makes him someone from whom we can learn!

Laura Morgan

Death of an Empress

IN THE crypt of the Capuchin Church in the heart of Vienna lie the remains of 143 members of the Habsburg dynasty. This was one of the most powerful families in European history, who ruled Austria and much of Europe for 600 years. The last empress, Zita of Bourbon-Parma, was interred there on 1st April 1989.

It perhaps cannot be said that the Habsburgs were more God-fearing than any other rulers of this world; but there

was a ritual which took place at Habsburg funerals which shows an admirable recognition of a fundamental Bible principle.

A contemporary account of Zita's funeral describes the horse-drawn hearse weaving through thronged streets of spectators to its destination at the crypt.

The Master of Ceremonies knocked on the door. A lone voice within said "Who desires entrance?" "Zita, the Empress of Austria," intoned the Master of Ceremonies, and listed her many grand and impressive titles. The voice inside said, "I know her not."

The Master of Ceremonies knocked again. The voice inside said, "Who desires entrance?" "Zita, her Majesty, Empress and Queen." Again, the voice said "I know her not."

The Master of Ceremonies knocked again, and again the voice said, "Who desires entrance?" The Master of Ceremonies said "Zita, a mortal, sinful human." The voice replied, "So let her come in," and the door was opened.

The Bible principle is this: "*All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field*" (Isaiah 40:6). That is what we are and that is what our lives amount to in the final reckoning – whether we're an empress or a beggar.



The Church and the Coffin



What is Life Worth?

The Bible book of Ecclesiastes takes a long hard look at life – what it is, what it means, and how best to live it. Its appraisal of the value of a person's life seems pretty bleak:

As he came from his mother's womb, naked shall he return, to go as he came; and he shall take nothing from his labour which he may carry away in his hand. And this also is a severe evil—just exactly as he came, so shall he go. And what profit has he who has laboured for the wind? (Ecclesiastes 5:15–16).

In fact, it goes further:

For what happens to the sons of men also happens to animals; one thing befalls them: as one dies, so dies the other. Surely, they all have one breath; man has no advantage over animals, for all is vanity (Ecclesiastes 3:19).

Some people are greatly privileged, others are born into poverty. Some people are dynamic, driven and talented and achieve great things in life. Others are not. Some go down in the history books and monuments are erected to their memories; others might pass away in obscurity and be instantly forgotten.

What everybody has in common is that when they die, they leave it all behind and turn to dust.

Godliness with Contentment

There are people who recognise this fact and conclude that life is meaningless: therefore they might as well enjoy it as well as they can: *“Let us eat and drink, for*

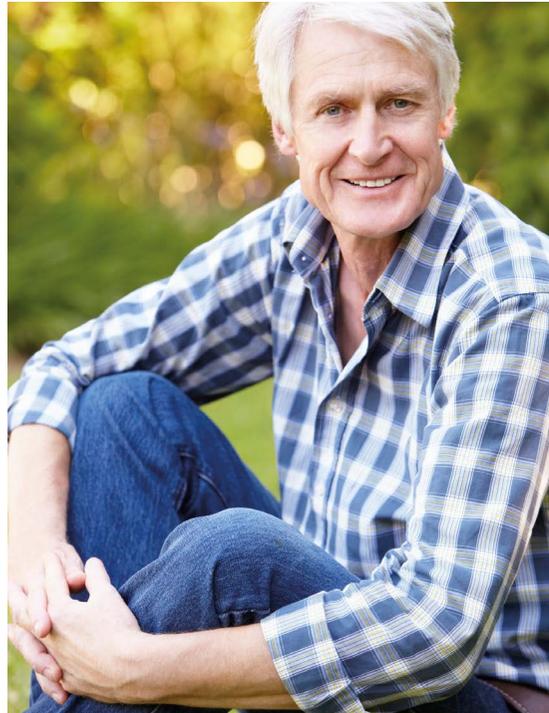
tomorrow we die!” (Isaiah 22:13). But that's a recipe for a very empty life!

The Bible, on the other hand, shows us how this fundamental fact about life is actually the key to true fulfilment. These are words of the apostle Paul:

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

Perhaps Paul is here recalling words of the Lord Jesus:

Do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we



wear?’ For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you (Matthew 6:31–33).

The state of mind that Jesus is describing is that which believes and trusts God, puts eternal life in God’s Kingdom above every other ambition, and seeks to develop a ‘righteous’ character – a character that is like God Himself. This is what Paul sums up as ‘godliness with contentment’, and it is great gain!

So here are two alternative responses to the human condition of mortality: ‘Eat and drink, for tomorrow we die!’, versus ‘godliness with contentment’. A restless and self-centred existence which will never find fulfilment and will end in oblivion, versus the true peace of mind which comes from knowing God, accepting what He gives us in this life, and looking forward with confidence to His Kingdom.

Death of an Apostle

You can look at the life of the apostle Paul, as it’s recorded in the Acts of the Apostles and the many letters he wrote, which are preserved in the Bible. You will observe a life lived in godliness and contentment, despite great hardships.

I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry,

both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me (Philippians 4:11–13).

Paul’s second letter to Timothy is the last letter of his which we have – it was written while he was a prisoner in Rome awaiting execution. In the last chapter of this letter he looks back on his life:

For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith (2 Timothy 4:6–7).

Paul probably died as a criminal with no extravagant funeral. Like a ‘flower of the field’ he withered away and turned to dust. But few people can ever have faced their death with such calm and confidence. Using the image of the laurel wreath awarded to victorious olympic athletes, he wrote:

Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved his appearing (verse 8).

Chris Parkin

www.PSDgraphics.com



Bears, Blood and Oil

ELISHA was now on his own as the prophet of the Lord God. It very quickly became obvious that he was a true prophet of the Lord, demonstrating the ability to do miracles on an impressive scale. The first was shortly after Elijah was taken away.

Elisha was still in Jericho and the leaders of the city came to him telling him about the poor quality of their local water, which also led to poor crops. Elisha asked for a new bowl and told them to put salt into it. They then went to the spring which provided the town's water, and Elisha threw the salt into the spring with the words:

Thus says the LORD: 'I have healed this water; from it there shall be no more death or barrenness' (2 Kings 2:21).

There follows a brief comment that the waters remained healed right up to the time when the record was written: this was no flash-in-the-pan miracle; the Lord God really did heal the waters.

The next incident in Elisha's life was not so pleasant. He returned to Bethel – then a centre of false religion – and was met by some lads who were very rude, jeering at him, “Go up, you baldhead! Go up, you baldhead!” (v23). They were not little boys, but a large group of youths, who knew exactly what they were saying and doing. Elisha looked back at them and cursed them in God's name.



Following this, two female bears came from the woods, and mauled forty-two of the lads. Whether this means they were killed is not entirely certain.

This is a strong warning about the way we should behave. Elisha was now the representative of the Lord God, and he was to be treated as such.

Four Kings

Elisha went north to Mount Carmel, and then returned to Samaria, which would be his base for a while. There are later references to “Elisha's house” (2 Kings 5:9), so he seems to have had a home of his own.

From here the prophet became involved in a dispute which involved four kings: Mesha, king of Moab, Jehoram (sometimes called Joram) of Israel, Jehoshaphat of Judah and the king of Edom.

The problem arose when Mesha refused to give to Jehoram the tribute he was expected to pay annually as a subject king. This was quite large: 100,000 lambs, and the wool from 100,000 rams. Jehoram sent a message to Jehoshaphat, asking him to join him and subdue Moab once more. Jehoshaphat readily acceded to his request and they were joined by the king of Edom. They marched for seven days, and then found themselves with a large army in waterless desert, which had dire implications for their men and their animals.

At this point reason prevailed, and Jehoshaphat asked if they did not have a prophet by whom they could ask for God's guidance. Jehoram's servants knew of the existence of Elisha, and that he had succeeded Elijah. Jehoshaphat agreed for he knew *"the word of the LORD is with him."* (2 Kings 3:12).

All three kings, from Israel, Edom and Judah, went off in search of Elisha. When they found him, he was dismissive of them all, suggesting they should go to their own prophets. They should have consulted a prophet of the true God before they had set off. He said to Jehoram:

As the LORD of hosts lives, before whom I stand, surely were it not that I regard the presence of

Jehoshaphat king of Judah, I would not look at you, nor see you (v14).

Elisha then asked for a musician to be brought, and when the musician played, he received a message from God. It was a very favourable answer, far better than they deserved.

Thus says the LORD: 'Make this valley full of ditches.' For thus says the LORD: 'You shall not see wind, nor shall you see rain; yet that valley shall be filled with water, so that you, your cattle, and your animals may drink.' And this is a simple matter in the sight of the LORD; He will also deliver the Moabites into your hand. Also you shall attack every fortified city and every choice city, and shall cut down every good tree, and stop up every spring of water, and ruin every good piece of land with stones (v16-19).

A Valley Of Blood

Just as God had promised, so it happened. The next morning, water appeared miraculously and filled the area. There was no further danger of death from thirst.

There was another amazing side effect of the vast quantities of water which God provided. The Moabites had begun to prepare for the battle, and were getting into formation at the border, when the sun began to rise. The glowing of the sun caused the water to appear like pools of blood, and they assumed there had been a deadly falling out amongst the three kings. The Moabites set off for the combined camp, intent on taking plunder from their dead enemies.

But the Israelites were not dead. As the Moabites poured into their camp, they were easily able to defeat them, and drive them back to Kir-hareseth, deep in the territory of Moab. They did tremendous damage to the land on the way.

The king of Moab, in a desperate attempt to retrieve the situation offered his own son as a sacrifice. Offerings to the idol god Molech were always by fire. This was abhorrent to God, something the people of Israel were strictly forbidden to do:

You shall not let any of your descendants pass through the fire to Molech, nor shall you profane the name of your God: I am the LORD (Leviticus 18:21).

Israel withdrew from Moab and returned to their own land. It was not the finest point in Israel's history, but proved once again that the word of God through his prophets always comes true.

A Jar of Oil

Elisha was soon involved in another miracle. The wife of one of the sons of the prophets (a group set up to teach the people about God) had been widowed and had no means of support. Sadly, it was not an unusual thing to happen. To make matters worse there was a creditor who was determined to find some way to retrieve what he was owed, even if it meant taking her two sons as slaves. She appealed to Elisha for help.

He asked what she had in the house, to receive the reply that she had nothing but



a jar of oil. The prophet told her to go and borrow all the empty containers she could. Then, back at home, and with the doors firmly shut she began to pour oil from her own jar. She poured it into the borrowed vessels, and miraculously the oil kept pouring until they were all full. Then it stopped.

She went to the man of God and told him what had happened. Elisha told her to go and sell the oil so she could pay her debts, and then live off the balance. It was a living miracle reminiscent of the time when Elijah had enabled the widow of Zarephath, her son and himself to live during the famine. The time of the two prophets Elijah and Elisha was a time of many miracles, all achieved by the power of God.

Mark Sheppard

2 Kings

2 KINGS is the record of the divided Jewish kingdom. The period ended with the overthrow of Israel by Assyria in 722 BC and of Judah 136 years later, by Babylon.

Two Kingdoms Topple

Idolatry and disobedience to God’s word was consistent in the Northern kingdom (Israel), which resulted in the downfall of that kingdom in 722 BC.

The southern kingdom of Judah, which had a few better kings, was finally overthrown by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, in 586 BC. Many of the Jews were taken into captivity in Babylon.

The Prophet Elisha

After he had seen Elijah taken away (chapter 2), Elisha became the next great prophet to Israel.

He asked Elijah for “a double portion of your spirit” (verse 9), and the number and nature of the miracles Elisha performed suggest that God granted the request. Examples include: healing the waters of a spring (2 Kings 2:19–21), increasing the widow’s oil (4:1–7), bringing the Shunammite’s son back to life (4:34), and causing an axe-head to float to the water’s surface (6:1–7).

One miracle with a specially significant

spiritual lesson was the cleansing from leprosy of Naaman, the Syrian commander-in-chief (chapter 5). By humbling himself and being willing to wash in the waters of the river Jordan, Naaman prefigured the act of baptism which Jesus commanded, which can cleanse a sinner and give him or her a new life: a ‘burial’ in water followed by a ‘resurrection’ to a new way of life.

Norman Owen

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Some interesting links with other parts of the Bible

- ◆ 2 Kings 5:1–14 – see Mark 16:16; Acts 22:16.
- ◆ 2 Kings 11:12 – see Psalm 2:6; Zechariah 14:9.
- ◆ 2 Kings 20:1 – see Isaiah 38:1, 18; Ecclesiastes 9:5.



In Our Hands

REBEKAH was graduating, embarking on a new chapter in her life. One of the speeches encouraged the graduates to ‘aim high’ – to do whatever they wanted; nothing was too hard.

But the eminent speaker also had a warning. Our planet is running out of time with regards to climate change, resources and animal life. We contribute to the problems so “in our hands lies the future of ourselves and all creatures on earth”. Rebekah was both encouraged and apprehensive: what *did* her future hold?

Our Limitations

Many people have an honourable concern for the future of life on this planet, feeling at least partly responsible for the damage we have done. God told us to look after His creation (Genesis 1:27–29, Psalm 8:6–8) and we should always be mindful that all good things – including life itself, clothes and food – come from Him.

Mankind’s inherent selfishness has caused the problems we all face (Genesis 3:17–19 then 5:29) and our irresponsibility has contributed to problems like pollution, food and fuel shortages and global warming. While some people are optimistic that we will find a solution, others are genuinely worried about our future.

However, God is in control. He rules in the kingdoms of men (Daniel 4:17), He alone

sustains all life on earth (Job 34:14–15, Isaiah 42:5, Acts 17:25), and nothing is too hard for Him (Jeremiah 32:17). While He is not always pleased with everything we do, He could and sometimes does intervene. We cannot do ‘whatever we want’ (Genesis 20:6).

God’s Plan for Our Future

God has a purpose with this earth which He created (Isaiah 45:18, Habakkuk 2:14). This plan cannot be thwarted by anyone or anything. The plan is for the earth to be changed to idyllic conditions full of His glory, with Jesus ruling as king (Isaiah 35, Revelation 11:15). God will intervene to stop mankind destroying the earth (Revelation 11:17–19).

So the planet’s destiny is not entirely in our hands. Things will not just continue on a path to disaster (2 Peter 3:4). We may have limited power over the planet but, like Rebekah, we do have life choices. God has commanded us to ‘repent’ (Acts 2:38, 17:29–31) and to submit our lives to Him for whom ‘all things [really] are possible’ (Matthew 19:26).

God wants us to embark on a new chapter of life accepting His promise of eternal life. *Our* personal destiny most certainly is ‘in our hands’.

Anna Hart

Forgiveness

MANY people have very mixed-up ideas about what is meant by 'sin'. To some people, not all wrongdoing is sin. Very often sin is only sin when it does harm to someone else. For example, they may consider it a sin to rob somebody with violence, but feel it is not a sin to defraud the taxman. There are those who will see some sexual practices to be sin, but not something like pride.

There are also those who do not recognise sin at all. They call it indiscretion, ignorance, selfishness – but not sin. Someone who does not believe in God will not understand sin. Only when you admit the existence of God are you confronted with the existence of sin. If God had not spoken to us, we might well be indifferent about sin – but God has spoken to us. He has preserved His word in the Bible.

Missing the Mark

The basic meaning of the Greek word which New Testament writers use for 'sin' is the idea of 'missing the mark'. You might fire an arrow and miss the target. You might have an ideal to attain to, but you fall short. In the Bible, God has set the mark and He has revealed the ideal.

God has revealed the ideal in the character of Jesus Christ, and I believe that anyone who has caught a glimpse of it, if they are honest, will know that they have fallen far short of it. Whether they have tried to hit

the mark or not, they will know that they have missed it. When we accept this, we are ready to consider forgiveness.

The forgiveness of sins is something which is right at the centre of the Christian faith. The Bible teaches it clearly. The apostle Paul, speaking of Jesus Christ writes, "*in whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins*" (Colossians 1:14).

The Paradox of Forgiveness

We must understand that God is just. Being 'just' means showing by your actions what is right and true. God is just, or 'righteous'; He always shows things as they are, and He is always true. Because He is righteous, He cannot act unrighteously. Because He is true, He cannot act falsely.

Dwell for a moment now upon the meaning of the word 'forgive'. Primarily it means



to set the prisoner free from prison. To pardon. To treat the offence as though it had never been committed.

So we have a problem. How can God, who must always be true, regard sin as not being committed when it has been committed? How can God be just and yet at the same time acquit people of their guilt?

It is important to understand this because there are those who say there is no problem with God forgiving sins, simply because 'God is love'. But please understand what love is. The love of God is not the sentimental softness which says, "Oh never mind the reality, let's all be friends". At the centre of the love of God there is justice and purity and righteousness. So, forgiving sin means not only acquitting the sinner but putting an end to the sin.

In people with a consciousness of sin, there is heartache and anguish and a real crying out for someone to lift the burden of a great weight on the heart and mind. If forgiveness was just a matter of God saying "Oh never mind, just say no more about it" – would this elicit a heart-felt response from us? Before we come to the solution, there is just one more thing we must understand: humans are inevitably sinners.

Human Nature

Romans 3:10–18 paints a portrait of you and me. Our nature is shot through with elements which are in active rebellion against God. We are biased towards sin

and away from God. This kind of nature we inherited from our first ancestor Adam. When Adam was created, he was made very good. His nature was balanced. He had the natural appetites of human nature, but they were under control. Over all his desires there was the influence of God.

But he fell under temptation. He chose sin and threw off the influence of God. He became a slave to his own desires. That is what sin really is: it is satisfying the natural desires in the wrong way.

It is right to satisfy hunger but not by robbing another man's larder. Sexual relationship is right, but not by taking another man's wife. In the first example the right way is by work and in the second the right way is by marriage. These examples are crude but illustrate the point. Sin is satisfying the natural appetites outside the realm of God's law.

This innate tendency in us has been inherited from Adam. We have all suffered from his first failure – we have shared in his weakened nature. We are born sinful and we act in a sinful way. We are sin's slaves. We cannot get rid of the tyrant ourselves.

This is now the whole problem in view – it shows us that to be forgiven is to remove not only the estrangement from God but also the effect.

Redemption

Forgiveness is parallel with 'redemption', and redemption means being brought out of prison or slavery. The Bible reveals

the solution – God’s son. Though born of a virgin on earth, Jesus Christ was unmistakably the son of God. He possessed all our natural appetites and was tempted in all the ways we are tempted. He was tempted to sin – tempted to satisfy his desires outside the realm of God’s law. But he never once failed.

Where Adam failed, Jesus triumphed. He met sin face-to-face, and overcame it. Sin mastered everyone else, but for the first time in the history of the world, sin was mastered by Jesus.

The men of his day hated his goodness. His life rebuked their wickedness. Because he was pure and true, he awakened against himself the rage of impurity and falsehood. They could not tolerate him – and so they had to get rid of him. It was sin which rose against him. But never once did he give way to it. He triumphed over it. The power of sin crucified him and his blood was shed but never once did it conquer him.

The Bible reveals to us a powerful message:

God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them (2 Corinthians 5:19).

Jesus Christ was a sacrifice – he sacrificed himself in order to defeat sin. God was prepared to expose His holy child to all the bitterness and brutality of sin in order to triumph over it. It was an expression of the amazing love of God.

God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son (John 3:16).

In Philippians 2:5–11, the apostle Paul writes about the sacrifice of Christ: he was “*obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross*”. Obedience to God is the opposite of sin. Jesus was victorious over sin even to the extent of dying on the cross rather than be mastered by it.

The Solution to the Paradox

Now the solution for the problem of our sin can be stated simply and profoundly. God is prepared to count His son’s victory to be our victory, if we will have it so. God is able to be just and at the same time to forgive the person who believes in Jesus. This is because sin has been beaten by our representative, Jesus the perfect man.

The vital thing is that we acknowledge him as our representative – and those who do so are counted as forgiven. In Christ, his triumph is their triumph. It is vital therefore to be ‘in Christ’. If, either through neglect or indifference or through rebellion we are not ‘in Christ’, we miss the mark and miss the pardon.

The Bible is quite emphatic on how this is to be achieved. It is by faith in God’s promises and baptism into Christ. The Apostle Paul says categorically:

Do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? (Romans 6:3).

Nothing could be plainer. By baptism we make his victory our victory. That is why the apostle says:

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins (Ephesians 1:7).

When Paul was converted, he was told:

Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins (Acts 22: 16).

This is the masterpiece of the Gospel. This is divine love which excels all other love. And can you see that not only is it loving, but it is also lovingly logical?

Just as Adam was our representative in the realm of sin – Christ becomes our representative in the realm of righteousness. Because of Adam’s failure we all were made sinners, so because of Christ’s victory we can be acquitted from sin and made righteous. And the making righteous is not only a matter of status, it is in fact a matter of practical goodness. That indeed is a very important reason why we need Jesus – to produce the transformation of our mind and heart – to begin to hate evil and love goodness. Someone who is pardoned is not acquitted and ready to sin

wilfully again, they are ready to quit sinning and seek goodness.

The New Life

To those who are in Christ, the power of self is confronted with the forces of the Gospel and the power of a new life. Not suddenly, but gradually, the new life becomes dominant. Slowness is not failure. The New Testament calls it fruit (Galatians 5:22) – the ‘*fruit of the spirit*’, and fruit grows slowly but wonderfully and divinely.

The apostle Paul once wrote, “*Christ lives in me*” (Galatians 2:20). He meant that the life of Christ was being shown in his own life.

This is the call and the power of the Gospel: “*Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus*” (Philippians 2:5).

It does not mean that after you are baptised you will not sin again, but it does mean that you can be forgiven. It does not mean that you will not stumble, but when you do, you will not be alone in the

recovery. It does not mean that you will never have to face hard decisions, but it does mean that you will never have to face them unaided. Jesus Christ will be your guide, saviour and king, now and hereafter. That is why we all need Jesus. He alone can pardon, purify and empower.

Dennis Gillett



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