

Scripture Truth

Little Things

Which Ananias?

Treasures of Love

The Gospel in Job

Studies in 2 Timothy

A Look at Nehemiah for Today

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Contents

Which Ananias?	1
Studies in 2 Timothy (Chapter 3)	7
A Look at Nehemiah for Today (Part 2)	12
Little Things (Part 4)	16
The Gospel in Job (Part 5)	21
Treasures of Love (Part 4)	25
The Father’s House	Back Cover

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Which Ananias?

Different approaches to being spiritual

Philip Nunn

This article has already been published in French and Dutch. It is published here because it deserves a wider audience. Be challenged by it!

Introduction

In a free society, religious life is optional. As in any modern supermarket, the western client may choose his brand of “faith” and also the degree of intensity to which he is willing to adhere to it. No person comes to true Christian faith unless the Holy Spirit works in his heart. Observing the apostle Paul’s evangelistic methods, we learn that there is also an intellectual element in conversion: “he *explained* and *declared*...and *tried to convince* them about Jesus” (Acts 28:23).

Conversion to Christ has moral and lifestyle implications. In his defence before king Agrippa, Paul declared, “I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their *deeds*” (Acts 26:20). It is impossible to yield to Christ and “just live a good life like everybody else”. A Christian engineer should be different from all other engineers. Christian teachers, nurses, business people, homemakers, cooks and shopkeepers must also be different. But different in what way?

Once a new convert joins the Christian community, he searches for models of spirituality. How does Christ expect him to live his new found faith? In time, the new believer will usually become like those Christians around him. Will he be a materialistic believer? a carnal fun seeking saint? Will he be intellectually lazy or alert? Will he develop an evangelistic or a defensive mind set? Will he ever enjoy true communion with Christ this side of death? Or will he end his life exhausted, running from one religious activity to the next, spurred on by the admiration of fellow saints?!

Given our corrupt sinful nature, in any choice we are inclined towards the vices. In the New Testament, we find three men named Ananias. They were contemporaries. Each, independently, for his own reasons, chose “faith in God” against being an atheist. Furthermore, each evidenced personal sacrifice as they lived in their God-fearing community. Yet each displayed a different approach to being spiritual.

Ananias – the shallow approval-seeker

We find these three men in the book of Acts. The first Ananias appears in ch.5. He is a fairly wealthy man, married to Sapphira, who joined the early church at a very exciting time. Yes, there was some persecution around, but there was great boldness, togetherness, and the hand of God was evident among them. Can you imagine living in a community where “no-one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had”? The degree of integration lived among early Christians was not simply a product of need or of social engineering. It was evidence of Almighty God transforming

corrupt human hearts. The apostle John sets this quality of relationship as evidence of being a true disciple of Jesus Christ (John 13:35) and even as a test of new birth (1 John 3:14).

One day, a brother named Joseph “sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles’ feet” (4:36,37). Ananias noticed that this generous act created a lot of good feeling within the Christian community. Such was the impact of Joseph’s way of living that the apostles changed his name to Barnabas (which means ‘son of encouragement’). In Barnabas, Ananias had now found a good model of spirituality to follow. There is a danger of following good positive behavioural externals without the necessary internal reality.

We humans are strange: we have the capacity to give all we possess to the poor and surrender our body to the flames, yet for the wrong reasons (1 Corinthians 13:3). This sacrificial giving without a genuine heart leads to disappointment and eventually to bitterness. Other people are not so thankful and appreciative. Those who give and serve expecting human praise and gratitude will, sooner or later, feel hurt and discouraged. It may even lead to anger and depression. Ananias desired the popularity of Barnabas. He coveted the kind words and admiration of God’s people. But deep inside his heart there was serious unfinished work!

To follow men of God, we need the transformed heart of these men of God. Are you giving and working hard, expecting the “well done” from fellow saints? Are you concerned about your “standing” in your Christian community? In some communities, you need to speak in tongues or fall down to be considered spiritual. In others, you need a tie and jacket or a certain vocabulary in prayer in order to be considered spiritual. To strive for human approval will eventually force us to pretend, to lie, to be what we are not.

One of the many blessings of married life is to have at our side a second conscience, a conscience that we cannot manipulate with endless internal arguments. Was it Sapphira’s or Ananias’ idea to deceive the apostles? Acts 5:2 hints that perhaps Ananias was the one who initially proposed the deceitful plan. The ending would have been so different if Sapphira had said, “Ananias, I know you are a very generous man. Let’s sell the plot of land and give half to the apostles, and invest the other half in stocks and shares towards our pension plan. And let’s be open about it!” This last sentence would have made the difference between life and death. Dear sisters, you have a key role to play in your husband’s conscience. Speak up in love. Don’t allow your husband to drift towards hypocrisy. You know him better than anybody else on earth and the Lord holds you equally responsible for your agreed actions.

It has been said that the image others have of our godliness usually exceeds our reality. The divergence between what we are and what we should be (and would like to be) is, at times, depressing. Ananias means ‘God is gracious’. The Lord knows our shortcomings. He is very aware of the gap between our biblical knowledge and our lifestyle, between our talking and our doing. But praise be to God, He is and always will be gracious. If the Lord were to remove inconsistent Christians today, who would be left? Fellow traveller on the

path of faith, let's leave aside our preoccupation with appearances and our image, and work on reality. Honesty and transparency are two important elements in our journey of spirituality.

Ananias – the obedient risk-taker

In Acts 9, we find our second Ananias. He was a converted Jew who lived outside Israel in the large city of Damascus. Paul later described him as “a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there” (Acts 22:12). Perhaps this referred to his life before conversion, but this is not clear. If he was still an observer of the law, we could conclude that Ananias was a relatively new convert from Judaism to Christianity. But his conversion was real. Scripture refers to him as “a disciple named Ananias” (9:10), and he was being persecuted for his new-found faith.

The depth of character of this Ananias far exceeds the previous one. It is evident that the Lordship of Christ had grabbed this man's soul. In becoming a Christian, he knew he was no longer a free agent to do as he pleased. He was now a servant of Jesus Christ. Although Ananias expressed doubts as to his personal security, he always referred to Jesus as ‘Lord’ (9:10,13,17). We, too, can express our fears and doubts to the Lord, not in a spirit of disagreement or confrontation, but seeking clarification. Mary also did this (Luke 1:34). Some prefer intelligent obedience, some blind obedience. But the key is obedience! It is not a matter of using the word ‘Lord’ when we pray or talk; it is a matter of submitting happily to His rights on our life. This may involve a willingness to risk misunderstanding, criticism, and even risk physical integrity.

The Lordship of Christ had grabbed this man's soul

There is a detail in this story which is very telling. Saul was in Damascus, hurting (he had fallen to the ground) and blind. In his confusion, he was praying (9:11). The Lord then gave Saul a vision in which he saw “a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight” (9:12). Then the Lord gave a second ‘audio-visual’ message, where He informed Ananias about the vision given to Saul. What is amazing is that Saul's vision comes first. The Lord had such confidence in the obedience of Ananias that He could include his name in Saul's vision before even talking to Ananias! Ananias' understanding of the Lordship of Christ had developed into habitual obedience. The Lord could now count on His servant.

Could the Lord include you and me by name in a vision to someone else? Can the Lord rely on us to listen and obey? Or does our obedience depend on what others do, what is on the TV that night, whether I like the proposal, whether it has been done before? The Lord expected Ananias to risk his health (Saul could have turned nasty) and to risk his reputation (remember, he was highly respected and that could change). Ananias was asked to do something risky and uncomfortable.

A similar pattern of visions appears in ch.10. The first vision, in which Peter's name is mentioned, is to Cornelius and then follows Peter's own vision. Although the Lord's instructions went against Peter's natural instincts and against his religious feelings, Peter risked his reputation and obeyed. The Lord knew He could count on both Cornelius and Peter. Obedience, like faith, grows stronger with use. "Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much" (Luke 16:10).

There is nothing spiritual about risk. In fact, different personalities feel differently about taking on risk. The virtue is not risk; it is obedience. But usually obedience requires faith, and faith involves a degree of risk.

When does the Lord guide His servants? The Lord had a few words for Saul on the road to Damascus but fuller guidance followed later. Saul's attitude of prayer (9:11) placed him in the condition to receive a vision from the Lord. Where was Peter when the Lord gave him a vision? "Peter went up on the roof to pray" (10:9). If we want guidance from the Lord, we also need this quietness in prayer. How can the Lord lay upon our heart the need to visit a sick saint in hospital or disciple a new believer? We need quietness in His presence. Do we desire to be used of the Lord in a children's Bible club or helping in the assembly? We need that quietness in His presence. At times we may feel confused; we may desire guidance for an important decision. The Lord longs to guide, but we need that stillness in His presence.

After Ananias delivered his message, he returns to obscurity. Like John the Baptist, he obediently did his bit, and then disappeared. The needs are great and we cannot do everything, yet each of us is called by God to do something. May we join the army of faithful saints who have gone before us and obediently do our bit before we also 'disappear'.

Ananias – the religious ladder-climber

Our last Ananias is also a Jew, also a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews. Through years of devoted work, he climbed the Jewish religious ladder, eventually becoming high priest (23:2). The office of high priest was created by God Himself. In the days when the nation of Israel was central to God's dealings with man, it was a very privileged job with awesome responsibility. Times were changing and God's dealings with men were also changing. Not aware of these changes, Ananias held on tightly to the reins of power. Not political power, since the Romans had that. Not spiritual power either, since the emerging church of Christ had that. Ananias defended the only power he could still control: organised religion and economic influence. When the Lord removes His lampstand (His presence) from a local church, local leadership is left in the same position as Ananias.

After being an exemplary Pharisee, Paul had now become a great irritation to Ananias and the other Jewish religious leaders. Initially, it had been Jesus who challenged their authority. Now the followers of Jesus were not submitting to their leadership. Paul's selfless abandonment in the pursuit of the expansion of the Church of Christ was interpreted by them as: "We have found this man to be a trouble maker, stirring up riots among the Jews

all over the world. He is a ring leader of the Nazarene sect and even tried to desecrate the temple” (Acts 24:5,6).

This highlights a latent danger in all forms of organised religion: spiritual growth is equated with progressing within religious structures. Christians with this approach to spirituality strive to be ‘on the board of directors’. Then they must show that they are worthy. Next they must defend their post. Perhaps that is why the Lord has designed His Church in such a way that the maximum authority on earth is given to the leaders of the local church. There is simply no big ladder to climb!

Given the past history of the church, it is very unlikely that a believer will be able to live 50 years in ‘Christian circles’ without meeting some form of schism. Division amongst God’s people is always painful, but perhaps more complex amongst those who love religious ladders and authority structures. Is it possible to have “sincere love for your brothers” and “love one another deeply from the heart” during periods of conflict? Some would say, “Yes, as long as those who disagree with me are willing to obey the truth the way I do” (1 Peter 1:22). We are prone to think that if a brother is honest before God, he must see the solution or the truth as I see it. We are inclined to explain all our differences in terms of carnal or legal, spiritual or non-spiritual, loose or committed, obedient or disobedient.

Paul opened his defence before the Sanhedrin as follows, “My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day” (Acts 23:1). At that point, “Ananias ordered those standing near Paul to strike him on the mouth” – where it hurts (v.2). What had Paul said? What irritated Ananias so much? Why such aggression? It had become impossible for Ananias to contemplate the possibility that Paul was acting with a clear conscience before God.

Perhaps if we would allow in our mind the possibility that a brother or sister can understand a portion of Scripture differently from us, it would reduce our urge to “strike him on the mouth”. It may help us sincerely to practise love in the midst of conflict. Truth is obviously more important than conscience. Paul, for example, had a clear conscience while killing Christians. In doing so, Paul was wrong, but not a hypocrite, not perverse.

Ananias and his friends were determined to get rid of Paul. They felt this to be their duty, given their position on the religious ladder. They assumed (21:29). They took solemn oaths; they planned; they used pretexts; they were devious (23:12-15). When the Romans transferred Paul from Jerusalem to Caesarea, Ananias still felt bound by duty. His approach to spirituality required this thorough pursuit. He took some elders and his lawyer, Tertullus, and “they brought their charges against Paul before the governor” (24:1). Human powered religion relies on group pressure and religious lawyers. God’s truth, reality as it is, stands firm and calm. But if you were in Paul’s shoes, or rather Paul’s chains, how would you feel towards Ananias? Ananias succeeded in that the apostle died in Rome. Was that fair? Was Paul working on a strategy to strike back? Did he seek revenge?

For Paul to remain useful under these difficult conditions, he did not allow bitterness, anger or resentment to get a grip on his heart. “Man’s anger does not bring about the

righteous life that God desires” (James 1:20). At least three disciplines protected Paul’s heart: he lived conscious that the Lord was with him (23:11); he behaved in such a way “to keep my conscience clear before God and man” (24:6); he never forgot *who* had called him and *for what*. He was restricted but not silent. He was surrounded but not fearful. He was in chains, but still an ambassador (Ephesians 6:19,20). Is bitterness, anger or resentment taking root in your heart? There is no justification. This dangerous and defiling acid does its corrosive work as we seek to defend ourselves. It must be recognised and confessed as sin. Then we can follow the apostle’s three disciplines to protect our heart and keep us useful.

The Lord used these frustrating and restrictive conditions to refocus Paul’s ministry. Because of Paul’s imprisonment, the Lord made it possible for him to witness to the governor, Felix (24:2,10), to Porcius Festus (24:27), to King Agrippa and Bernice, to “high ranking officers and leading men of the city” (25:23). Paul also had more time available to write apostolic letters.

Have you recently lost a loved one? Is your freedom being limited by age or ill health? Are you going through some form of financial crisis? Could it be that the Lord is using change, pain or conflict to redirect your area of service? Thank the Lord for His past faithfulness. Don’t stare at the limitations. Look up and move calmly through the new doors which the Lord opens. The Lord’s prophetic words to the previous Ananias began to be fulfilled: “This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings” (9:15).

Conclusion

The apostle Paul desired that new believers would grow and become “spiritual” (1 Corinthians 3:1). The local church needs “spiritual” people (Galatians 6:1). Which Ananias best reflects your approach to spirituality? Being spiritual is not a state we reach, but rather a way of life, a road we walk with Jesus. Early Christians were those who “belonged to the Way” (Acts 9:2). They worshipped God as followers of the Way (24:14). The term “the Way” suggests boundaries, motion and destination. We are not called to jump or smile for those standing on the sides, nor to seek the approval of those walking with us on the Way – like the first Ananias.

There are no such things as ladders, structures and privileged positions on this road to spirituality. We shall progress no faster by condemning others or by criticising other Christians’ walking styles (although we do not need to follow them or to imitate them). We need not be aggressive – like the last Ananias.

The Way is the same, but the scene is constantly changing. Today it is sunny; tomorrow it may be windy. Sometimes the road is uphill; sometimes it leads beside quiet waters. Fellow traveller, the only way to grow in spirituality is to walk daily close to Jesus Christ our Leader, to enjoy His company, to learn to listen to His voice and obey His instructions – like the second Ananias. In closing, please take time to chew and digest again those well known words of the Lord Jesus, “I am the *way* and the *truth* and the *life*” (John 14:6).

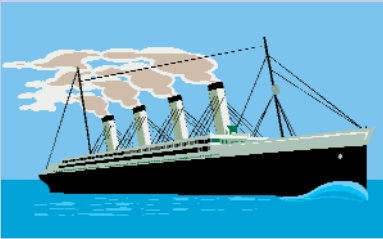
Studies in 2 Timothy

Chapter 3 – Last days and their perils

Gordon Hughes

“But know this...” Paul’s final words to his son in the faith, Timothy, are still an important warning to us today. This article is based on a talk broadcast on London’s Premier Radio.

Perils of the last days



Some 90 years ago, the Titanic sank with such dreadful loss of life. That magnificent liner had set off in such high hopes on her maiden voyage to cross the Atlantic. There had never been a ship like her. With her sealed watertight compartments she was supposedly unsinkable. Instead, she came to grief as a huge iceberg tore a gaping hole in her side.

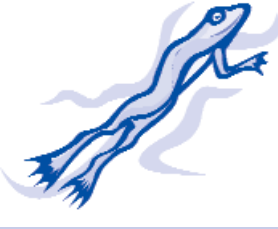
If only there had been some warning that she was sailing into perilous waters! If only there had been a look-out who might have seen those icebergs earlier and warned the captain! But there was no warning and more than 1,000 perished.

2 Timothy 3 is Paul’s warning to his son in the faith, Timothy, of the spiritual perils which lay ahead. This letter is Paul’s last letter before his martyrdom. In it, he pours out his love and care for his young son in the faith. Paul wants to prepare Timothy, as much as possible, for the time when Timothy would no longer have him to turn to. To be forewarned is to be forearmed!

Paul’s warning to Timothy ought to have an even greater urgency and importance for us today, more than nineteen centuries on in the history of the Church. In the first five verses of this chapter, Paul warns, “In the last days, perilous times will come”. He goes on to describe the kind of people living then and ends, “...lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!” This is no mere cry of “Wolf!”, but represents the deep concern of Paul as, with the spiritual insight given of God, he saw what lay ahead. It was no exaggeration on Paul’s part to write of “perilous times”. He foresaw the very real spiritual perils ahead.

It is said that if a frog is dropped into a pan of boiling water, it will immediately jump out and save its life. If that same frog is put into a pan of





cold water and that pan is slowly warmed up, then the frog will stay in the water until it is overcome by the heat. It is then too late for the frog to jump out and the poor frog perishes!

There is a very real danger in this comfortable 21st century that we, as Christians, fail to realise the changes which for many years have been gradually taking place around us. In particular, the increasing disregard for the word of God which characterises much of life today is an attitude into which we can all too readily slip. 2 Timothy 3 is Paul's wake-up call to Christians everywhere before it is too late.

"The last days" is an expression which occurs 8 times in the Bible. Generally, it seems to refer to that time just before the coming of the Lord for His Church. As the Lord Jesus left His disciples to go to the cross, He promised them, "And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also" (John 14:3). That hope of the Lord's imminent return has been the Christian's hope in every generation since then. At times, it has burned more brightly in the hearts of believers than at other times. Every generation of believers, then, has been able to live in the sense that they may well be living in the last days. S. Trevor Francis beautifully expresses that hope as follows,

"I can almost hear His footstep on the threshold of the door,
And my heart, my heart is longing to be with Him evermore."

If Paul could warn Timothy of the perils of the last days which threatened him, how much more do we need to heed Paul's warning! Certainly, as we read down the characteristics of those last days, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that we are indeed living in those last days. Let's consider just a few of them.

"Men will be lovers of themselves." More than ever, today's attitude seems to be, "It makes me feel good, so it must be all right". Questions of right or wrong, or what the Bible has to say about the matter, are ignored.

"...lovers of money." In his first letter to Timothy, Paul had already warned, "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil" (1 Timothy 5:10). Many today find themselves caught up in a relentless pursuit of money to buy more and more things. That pursuit is actively encouraged by the media with aggressive advertising.

"...boasters, proud." "We're more important than Jesus Christ" was the proud boast of the Beatles in the 1960s. Although the Beatles still enjoy some measure of popularity, others in the pop world have taken their place. But the Lord Jesus remains "the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Hebrews 13:8).

"...disobedient to parents." The problem of teenage crime, so prevalent today, is, in large part, due to failure in parental discipline. This lack of respect for parents leads to a general lack of respect for all authority.

We do not need here to go through the entire list but read it at your leisure. It makes for sorry reading. Lower down the list, we come to the telling words, "...lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God". Today, this is clearly seen in the fact that, whereas Sunday was once given up to going to church, it is now largely devoted to amusement and pleasure.

Our present day certainly shows all the characteristics of the last days, these perilous times. Paul is not exaggerating when he describes them as 'perilous times'. The Christian is in real spiritual peril of being affected by these attitudes so prevalent in the world. Little wonder, then, that Paul writes, "From such people turn away". Don't let these attitudes infiltrate your Christian life! Until He comes, the Lord leaves us here to "shine as lights in the world" (Philippians 2:15), but He wants us to keep ourselves "unspotted from the world" (James 1:27).

In vv.8,9, Paul reminds Timothy that opposition to the truth of God is not new. He instances the opposition of Pharaoh's magicians to Moses when Moses challenged Pharaoh to let God's people go (Exodus 7:10-13). Incidentally, it is only here that we learn the names of those magicians. But all such opposition must eventually fail!

The remedy for perilous times

Verses 1-9, then, present Paul's solemn warning to Timothy of the perils to be expected in the last days. From v.10 to the end of the chapter, we have Paul's remedy for these perilous times. So Paul writes, "But you have carefully followed my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, love, perseverance, persecutions, afflictions, which happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra – what persecutions I endured. And out of them all the Lord delivered me. Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution" (vv.10-12).

Note that little word 'but'. So often, in Scripture, it's like turning a corner from shadow into sunshine. So Paul writes to the Ephesians, "You...were by nature children of wrath, just as the others. *But* God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us..." (2:3,4). Occasionally, however, that word 'but' turns us, as it were, from sunshine to shadow (e.g. 2 Kings 5:1). Here, we turn from the darkness of behaviour in the last days to the lovely example of Paul's life.

We learn from Acts 16 that, when Paul came to Lystra, he took Timothy, a native of that city, to join Silas and himself. Timothy was thus with Paul for most of his second, and for all of his third, missionary journeys. He had plenty of opportunity to see Paul at work in his service for the Master. Timothy saw him in good days and in bad. He could see what made the apostle tick. So Paul might well write, "You have carefully followed..."

Lights in the world... unspotted from the world

The impregnable rock of Holy Scripture

What was it that Timothy carefully followed? First in the list comes ‘my doctrine’. Paul’s Christian life was not based on his own ideas but on what he had “received from the Lord” (1 Corinthians 11:23). Much of that teaching we still have with us in Paul’s epistles. But closely allied to that doctrine was ‘my manner of life’. What Paul preached, he also practised! What an important lesson that was for Timothy, and also for us today! It has been well said, “What you practise shouts so loudly that others cannot hear what you say”.

But Timothy had also been an eyewitness of Paul’s ‘persecutions, afflictions’. Not long after joining Paul and Silas, Timothy had gone with them to Philippi and seen them beaten and thrown into prison (Acts 16:12-40). Paul’s description of his service for the Master is very moving: “From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of water, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness” (2 Corinthians 11:24-27). The details of much of that are not recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, but Timothy must have witnessed a large part of it.

But Paul can add, triumphantly, “Out of them all the Lord delivered me”. The servant of the Lord is not sheltered from trouble but he has the assurance that the Lord will deliver him out of it. So Paul forewarns Timothy, and us today, “All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution”. That persecution is still evident in those countries that are opposed to the Christian Gospel. Here in this country, following Christ may not result in physical persecution but it often results in ridicule.

Timothy’s resource for the last days would lie in the Holy Scriptures. So Paul writes, “But as for you, continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that 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” (vv.14-17).

Timothy had the inestimable benefit of a godly upbringing in which the Holy Scriptures played a large part. For young Timothy, those Holy Scriptures would be largely our Old Testament since much of the New Testament was not then written. Today we have the great blessing of a complete Bible. Timothy’s security then, and ours today, lies in our

obedient trust in those same Holy Scriptures, ‘the impregnable rock of Holy Scripture’, as W.E. Gladstone put it.

Those Holy Scriptures are, indeed, able to “make [us] wise unto salvation”. Paul uses the word ‘salvation’ in its widest aspect. It covers salvation from the penalty of our sins: “For by grace you have been saved through faith” (Ephesians 2:8). But it also covers the fact that we are to know God’s saving and preserving power in our lives now: “The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18) – salvation from the power of sin. Finally, it covers that wonderful time when the Lord Jesus comes from heaven for His Church, that time when we shall be changed to be like Him: “Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation” (Hebrews 9:28) – salvation from the very presence of sin. Hallelujah! What a Saviour!

“Search the scriptures; for in them you think you have eternal life: and they are they which testify of Me”, the Lord Jesus told the Jews (John 5:39). Of the Bereans we are told, “These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so” (Acts 17:11).



We cannot overemphasise the importance of 2 Timothy 3:16,17 in a day when so many spiritual perils threaten the Christian. It is interesting how often chapter 3 verse 16 marks an important statement in Scripture though, of course, the chapter and verse divisions were not part of the original inspiration of Scripture. The opening statement is literally, “All Scripture is God breathed”. The words you speak might be said to be “you breathed”. They are conditioned by the

interaction of your vocal chords with air expelled from your lungs. Your words sound different to mine though the same air is being expelled from our lungs. So God used some 35-40 different writers over a period of about 1,600 years, not obliterating their human personalities but bringing through them His living word, the Holy Scriptures.

Why has He given us His word? V.17 says, “That the man of God may be complete”. ‘The man of God’ is an expression often used in the Old Testament where it signifies one who was ready to stand for God in an evil day. It is used only twice in the New Testament – here and in 1 Timothy 5:11. In both cases, the word used is not limited to males, but covers males and females.

For all of us, women and men alike, the resource for Christian living in the last days, in perilous times, here and now, is to be found in the Holy Scripture. “...that the man of God may be complete” – every resource needed to live a life pleasing to God will be found in its pages. Read it! Meditate on it! Treasure it! Obey it!

A Look at Nehemiah for Today

Part 2 Nehemiah – the daring man (2:1-11)

Ted Murray

“The people who know their God shall...carry out great exploits” (Daniel 11:32). Be inspired by this study of Nehemiah’s daring.

Waiting on God

Thirteen years have transpired since Ezra left Babylon for Jerusalem to carry out his task of retrieving the situation there for the Lord. We saw in ch.1 that there appeared to have been another falling away in the testimony of the remnant in Jerusalem. Four months have passed during which Nehemiah ponders the news received from Jerusalem.

As ch.2 opens, we find Nehemiah still doing his duty in the king’s palace. He was waiting for an opportunity when he could approach “this man” (1:11) concerning the welfare of his brethren in Jerusalem, but was very conscious of the danger in which he could find himself. He was the king’s cupbearer, the man who tasted the wine to check its suitability and so ensure that there was nothing in it that would harm the king. He would have been a man of integrity, a man to whose counsel the king would listen, a dependable man. Here we find him summoning up courage, patiently waiting for the opportune moment when he might ask the king for permission to leave his presence. There are times when patience has to be exercised while we wait for the moment when the Lord chooses to act. We are quite happy to sing the words

“Our times are in Thy hand,
Whatever they may be,
Pleasing or painful, dark or bright,
As best may seem to Thee.”

But very often it is another matter to experience the darkness and the pain. Nehemiah was passing through both these experiences as he waited on the king, but he was not deterred from his task. For four whole months he had thought about this problem. During that time, nothing seemed to be happening that would resolve the matter. Those earnest prayers seemed to have gone unanswered. No wonder he was looking down in the mouth, even in the king’s presence. What a situation to be in!

Helpless... but not hopeless

Seizing the opportunity

Nehemiah must have felt helpless but he was certainly not hopeless. When the king asked why he looked so sad, he was able to grasp, with both hands as it were, the opportunity that the Lord gave him. There are times when circumstances today cause the Christian to be downcast, when God given opportunities to serve Him slip by. It has been said that “an opportunity neglected can result in an eternity lost”. What virtues we find in Nehemiah. Scripture records that he was dreadfully afraid (v.2) as he heard the king say, “There is nothing physically wrong with you, but there is something on your heart”. In Nehemiah’s answer, we hear the truth and see an example of courage.

To speak the truth in any circumstance can require courage. To stand for the truth requires daring and fortitude. These virtues are in short supply in today’s world, but they should readily be seen amongst believers. In Nehemiah, we see a man who was waiting for the God-given moment and, in his response, we have a pattern which we should follow.

Nehemiah shows his respect for the king and informs him of the reason for his sadness. He tells the king of his awareness of the sad situation in his homeland and expresses his concern for his people there. Are we fully aware of the sad situation in Christendom? Do we sorrow for, and with, those who suffer for the sake of the testimony of Christ? Or are we satisfied with our lot? Nehemiah had a reasonably secure position. He was, as stated previously, in a position of trust. His job security was good, provided he did nothing to upset the king. He had a roof over his head; he fed from the king’s table.

Nehemiah’s general circumstances were not so very different from those of many of us today. The Government has established a welfare system which, in the main, looks after our physical needs from the cradle to the grave. In the west, we know very little about hardship or the persecution suffered by fellow believers in other countries. We ought daily to thank God for the material blessings that we are inclined to take for granted and for the fact that we are kept from persecution. But we must also bring to Him at the throne of grace the needs of our suffering fellow believers: “And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it” (1 Corinthians 12:26).

Nehemiah realises that the moment for which he had been waiting had now come. The king asks, “What do you request?” What a moment this was for Nehemiah! He was given the opportunity to make his request to a potentate who had all the necessary resources! But we read that Nehemiah first prays “to the God of heaven” (v.4) and then speaks to the king. Note the order we find in Scripture. God is given the pre-eminent position. Paul reminds us that this position of pre-eminence belongs to the Lord by right (Colossians 1:18).

Nehemiah’s prayer was from the heart; it was direct, not wordy. Nehemiah did not wait to attend the prayer meeting or for his prayer time, but an immediate cry for help

went from his heart. And God heard his cry! Nehemiah not only walked, but also talked, with his God.

We now find Nehemiah, confident that God was with him, making his request to rebuild his homeland. To the casual reader, this might seem a rather audacious and improbable request to make. But to a man who had absolute confidence in his God, it was not so. The Lord Jesus reminds us that, with God, all things are possible (Matthew 19:26). All the thoughts, desires and plans which Nehemiah had had during those four long months were now unfolded before the king and his queen. Nehemiah does not appear to have been tongue-tied, or to need time to make his presentation to the king. He straightway embarks on the need of the project. God had made Nehemiah aware of the breakdown, the conditions and the lack of materials. And God had put the desire in Nehemiah's heart to rebuild.

We can see the breakdown in the testimony today; we know the conditions which exist in many assemblies. We may moan about the lack of resources, but often the desire to rebuild is also lacking. Let us never forget that we have access to the King of kings, the Head of His Body, the Church. He is the One who has untold resources, the One who delights to give, the One who has said, "Ask and you shall receive" (John 16:24). Do we know what it is to tap into those unlimited resources?

Nehemiah did not just ask for leave of absence from the court for a period of time. He also asked for a letter of commendation, a permit to pass through the region beyond the river, and an order to Asaph to make available all the timber Nehemiah required for the repairs of the gates and to build a dwelling place for Nehemiah (v.8). The verse goes on to read, "the king granted me, according to the good hand of my God upon me". Like Ezra before him, Nehemiah acknowledges that all blessing comes from God. So Paul reminds us that it is God who gives the increase (1 Corinthians 3:6).

Ready to help

We are not told how long it took for Nehemiah to organise his retinue. As an official of the king's court, he had a standing amongst the people of his day and the king gave him an escort. He does not appear to have wasted any time: "Then I came to the governors beyond the river..." (v.9). We are apt to consider what may be the most favourable time, whether the most up to date equipment is at our disposal, whether we have met current criteria regarding safety in the workplace etc.

Nehemiah does not appear to have any such worries. He was armed with a letter of authority from the king. He was on the king's business! We ought to remind ourselves

We are on the King's business

that this, too, is our task today. We are on the King's business! We have His commission to spread His word. We have His request to remember Him. In the New Testament, we have His instructions, the apostles' doctrine, and we have the indwelling of His Holy Spirit. But there are times when we still lack that determination to fulfil His work.

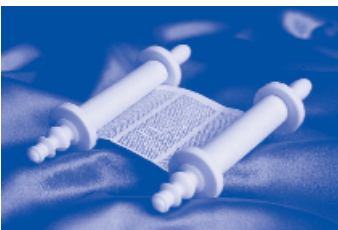
The daunting journey over, Nehemiah now presents his credentials to the governors of the mixed race of Samaritans, who had been settled in the land at the command of Esar-haddon. He meets two somewhat disturbed men, Sanballat and Tobiah, one a Heronite and the other an Ammonite, descendants of Lot. Both of these men were the result of the shameful events recorded in Genesis 19, when God was left out of the equation and man, or more particularly women, took control.

From this event, we learn that when someone seeks the welfare of God's people, there will always be opposition. Initially Sanballat and Tobiah were merely disturbed by Nehemiah's presence. Later in the book, we see that their agitation turned to mockery, then contempt, then conspiracy, and finally, direct opposition to Nehemiah. Satan has not dramatically changed his tactics. They are still used today by those who oppose the Gospel. In the west, mercifully, we are often only exposed to his less severe opposition. Nevertheless, it is sad to see in the church today those who attempt to pour cold water on any movement of the Spirit of God. Deuteronomy 23:3-6 states that "an Ammonite or a Moabite shall not enter into the congregation". This judgment was the direct result of the failure of these peoples to help the children of Israel in the wilderness, of their hiring Balaam to curse the Israelites, and of their leading the Israelites into idolatry.



There are, sadly, some in assemblies today who are embracing customs which are contrary to Scripture, gladly adopting practices which are current in present day Christendom, scorning those who hold fast to the principles and teaching which were graciously restored by the Lord, and have been passed down to us by men of God

in past generations. Just before he was martyred, Paul asked Timothy to bring with him the cloak, the



books and, especially, the parchments (2 Timothy 4:13). Today, there seems to be a tendency to neglect the comfort of the cloak of fellowship, to ignore the scriptures which do not comply with current modern thinking, and to let the teachings contained in the writings of saints of God gather dust on our bookshelves.

Little Things

Part 4 A little town – Bethlehem

Jonathan Hughes

The wonder of the Bethlehem story is not just for Christmas but for every day. Enjoy this study of this little town. This is the last in a series on the ‘little things’ of Scripture. It is based on a talk given on London’s Premier Radio.

Biggest is not best

From time to time, all of us need to confront ourselves with the issue of how we evaluate things. Nowhere is this more appropriate than in a draughty manger in a little town called Bethlehem. Christmas having just passed and a new year having dawned, it is doubly appropriate that our thoughts focus on Bethlehem. We all tend to think more of ourselves, and our surroundings, than we ought to. We have a deep rooted desire to be noticed and appreciated, to make our mark, to stand out from the crowd. It’s a part of our sinful human nature that we almost cannot help, but neither do we make all that much effort to control!

Two questions help to reinforce this point. What is the longest river in the world? What is the highest mountain in the world? Many would be able to give the right answers to these questions with only a moment’s thought. Now let me ask you two more questions. What is the smallest mountain? What is the shortest river? Any takers?! From our earliest years, we are taught that biggest is best. From the very beginning of our history, humanity has evidenced the desire to try to be more than we truly are.

“So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them” (Genesis 1:27). One might have thought that nothing could be greater than being created in the very image of God. And yet in ch.3, we read how Satan tempts Eve with the words, “You will be like God, knowing good and evil” (v.5). Eve took the bait, thinking there was more to be had, and lost everything. It is no wonder, then, that Jeremiah had to confront his listeners with the solemn words, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?” (17:9).

The thoughts and actions of God, on the other hand, are quite different. “They do not know the thoughts of the LORD, nor do they understand His counsel” (Micah 4:12). God knows exactly who He is and never puffs Himself up with pride. This message was one that Samuel had to learn directly from God, as God told him, “The LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7). God, in all the splendour of His majesty, does not need any outward adorning to enhance His glory. No, when God chose to enter this world, He did so in the most humble of circumstances!

Imagine that I owned one of the masterpieces of Van Gogh. I wouldn’t then choose to hang it in a gaudy frame, against a wall covered in beautiful floral wallpaper. No, that would only detract from the picture itself. In much the same way, any human glory in

terms of city or building, fanfare or ceremony, could only detract from the displayed excellence of the incarnation of the unique Son of God.

We should note what Scripture says about our little town: “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 have been from of old, from everlasting” (Micah 5:2). Bethlehem was a small town, about 10 km to the south of the capital city of Jerusalem. It is here identified as Bethlehem Ephrathah, in much the same way as we speak about Newcastle-upon-Tyne, as opposed to Newcastle-under-Lyme. One can almost hear the surprise in the voice of the prophet. “Are you sure, God? Really, this Bethlehem? But it is only a little town among thousands in Judah, and Judah wasn’t even the eldest son of Jacob.” There was certainly nothing to highlight this town as special. And yet it was to be here that the promised Ruler would be born. From these small beginnings would come, in God’s good time, the One who would rule over Israel.

Bethlehem in history

The first mention of a place, or person, in Scripture is often interesting. We first read about Bethlehem in Genesis 35:19. It was here that Rachel, the beloved mother, was buried after giving birth to Benjamin (whose name means ‘son of my right hand’). From the beginning, then, we have Bethlehem associated with a life given for a child who was much loved. As we consider the One who fulfils this prophecy of Micah, we cannot fail to see in Jesus the One who loved us, and gave His life for us, His children.

Throughout the period of the judges, we read of Bethlehem being caught up in the religious confusion that became such a trademark of the Israelites. Out of this confusion would come One who would bring perfect clarity and order. Can any truly doubt the love of God, or His holiness, when they consider the lengths to which He has gone to bring salvation to this world?

We next read about this little town in the book of Ruth. It was from Bethlehem that Naomi set out with her husband and sons and returned with Ruth. The story that follows is one of the greatest pictures of redemption in the Bible. Peter, in his first epistle, writes about our being redeemed “not...with corruptible things, like silver or gold...but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot” (1 Peter 1:18,19). Such small beginnings, such great results!

Bethlehem is perhaps best known as the birthplace of King David (1 Samuel 16:1). So the town inherited a part in the royalty of the nation. But as God spoke to Samuel about Jesse, David’s father, saying, “I have provided Myself a king among his sons”, we can readily imagine, as it were, God’s thoughts filling up with a picture of His Son, the King of kings, born in Bethlehem’s draughty manger.

Such small beginnings, such great results!

The other important mention of Bethlehem is to be found in 2 Samuel 23. As David longed for water from the well of Bethlehem, his men hear his desire and risk their lives to fetch some. As they offer it to their king, he pours it out as an offering to God. Who was he to satisfy himself at the expense of other men's lives? Yet, in the fullness of time, there was going to be born in Bethlehem, One who gave His life for us. He, consequently, truly deserves the sacrifice of the whole of our lives. In his famous hymn, Isaac Watts writes,

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were an offering far too small:
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

Yet, like David, Jesus never lightly receives anything done for Him. He alone knows the true cost of sacrifice, and will always value aright what is given to Him. In Mark's Gospel, where He is presented as the perfect Servant, Jesus promises, "I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in My name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward" (9:41).

The Word was made flesh

Love to the point of death, redemption, royalty, reward – all these themes are associated with this little town in the heart of Judah. But now, as Micah prophesies, all these things, besides many more, would unite in the one blessed Person of God Himself made flesh!



Particularly at Christmas time, we are faced with the enormity of what happened in this insignificant town. In the person of Jesus, God became a man! It was not that Jesus represented all that God wanted mankind to know, although He did. No, far more incredible, all the fullness of the Godhead chose to dwell in bodily form in Him (Colossians 1:19)! Yet Jesus was truly man. He could be thirsty; He could grow weary. He felt pain and sorrow, but also joy. The biological and chemical reactions which occur to enable life to continue took place in Him as they do in us. And yet He still remained wholly divine. Not for one moment was He any less than God when He took on human form. These two natures perfectly blended as one in Him. He never acted in His divine nature at the expense of His humanity. He never expressed His humanity to the detriment of His divine nature.

This incredible, fantastic, incomprehensible reality would be utterly impossible normally. But then Jesus was no ordinary man! When we consider who God is, then the impossible becomes perfectly acceptable, although we may not understand how it could be. We don't need to. I don't understand how the earth maintains its constant orbit, nor how some carbon reaction can make a happy memory, but I'm glad that they do.

How could God adopt humanity in all its fullness, sin apart, is far too much for me to begin to understand. Yet as a man He came, born in this little town, to go to the cross at Calvary, there to lay down His precious, unique life in death to become the Saviour of the world. The most important question each of us must answer is this: Is Jesus your Saviour? Atheist, agnostic or religious person alike – this Jesus, born in this little town, has died to pay the debt due to God for our sins. Today is the day to receive Him and the forgiveness and peace which He alone can give. You don't deserve it! Who ever could? You don't understand how it can be! Who ever can? Charles Wesley summed it up as he wrote, "Our God contracted to a span, incomprehensibly made man". All that is left is for us to accept Him.

In the coming of the Lord Jesus at Bethlehem, we see how God works. He made Himself small, and achieved so much. So often we puff ourselves up, and achieve so little. We need to learn from Elijah (see 1 Kings 17). As he comes to the dead boy, we read that he stretched himself out on the lad and prayed. Elijah, a full grown man, stretches himself out and becomes small! So God hears him, and the boy comes back to life. Sometimes we miss out on so much that God has for us when we try to be more than we are.

Micah's prophecy, as we have seen, closes with the important words, "Whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting", or "Whose origins are from of old, from days of eternity" (NIV). Commenting on these words, C.I. Schofield writes, "The Ruler comes from Bethlehem in time, but His activities have been from eternity. His goings forth were in creation, preservation, providences, theophanies, and redemptive activity. The eternal pre-existence of the Messiah is thus strongly presented."

When Jesus was born, His life did not begin, merely His existence in human form. In this, he is absolutely unique. My mother can look back to a day before I was born, and probably wonders what she did with her time! At that time, I was utterly unknown because I did

not exist. As Mary and Joseph looked down at the tiny form of their newborn son, did they have any comprehension that here was One who had existed before they were even born, before the world had ever been created?

The one and only Son of God is eternal. In John's Gospel, that truth is clearly taught. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (1:1). In the language used in John 1, there are two verbs that can be translated 'to be'. In English, we have the verbs 'to be' and 'to become', the former implying something that always was, whereas the latter suggests a starting point in time. Here in v.1, the verb used is the 'to be' which has no time attached to it. The Word always was, right from the very beginning, before time and creation. But in v.14, we read, "The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us". So the One who had always been became human.

Jesus took on human form as the Baby of Bethlehem. And it all started here, in this little town. This eternal Ruler stepped into time, as man, in a manger, in a stable, because there was no room for Him anywhere else. But that was also where He chose to appear, right at the bottom, as it were. He took no outward trappings of human glory, for nothing could add to the glory that was already His. John 1:14 continues, "...and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth". In His humility and littleness, He was greater than all the greatness of man combined. No wonder Phillips Brooks could write,

O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light;
The hopes and fears of all the world are met in thee tonight.

Who could begin to count the hopes and fears that exist throughout the world today? And yet they are met, and can be answered, by the One born in this little town.

In the future

This little town was just the beginning. The end of the story is foretold in Genesis 49. As Jacob approached the end of his life, he gave each of his sons a prophetic blessing. To Judah, he said, "The sceptre will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until He comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is His" (v.10). Micah foretold a ruler who would rule over all Israel. This rule, however, is to be expanded to include the whole world. This same One, who became so small, will be universally acknowledged by friend and foe alike.

Those who love Him will soon gladly bow their knees to Him; those who do not even acknowledge His existence will be forced to do so. Every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:11). What God has started, He will complete in the person of His Son. From Jerusalem to the farthest reaches of the world, He will reign, to the good of all mankind. And in this little town? In this little town also they will make room for Him one day. Will you make room for Him today?

The Gospel in Job

Part 5

Yannick Ford

Job is almost crushed by his circumstances and the criticism of his supposed friends. Yet throughout it all, he clings to his faith: “I know that my Redeemer lives...”, he can say. That same certainty can act as a linchpin of our lives.

Eliphaz’s second speech (ch.15)

We now come to the start of the second cycle of speeches, in which Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar in turn again argue with Job, and Job responds to each one. At first, Eliphaz had started off reasonably gently: “Then Eliphaz the Temanite answered and said, If we assay to commune with thee, wilt thou be grieved? but who can withhold himself from speaking?” (4:1,2). Put another way, he had asked, “Would you be upset if I had a talk with you – if I gave you some advice?”

But now Eliphaz is evidently irritated with Job’s response that what he and his other two friends had said was not helpful. He accuses Job of “unprofitable talk” (v.3), and then he says, in effect, “Are you the wisest of men? Do you know everything? We know at least as much as you!” (vv.7-10). He continues, “Are the consolations of God too small for thee? and the word gently spoken to thee?” (v.11, JND trans.). The speeches of Job’s three friends, however,

could hardly be classed as “words gently spoken”!

Eliphaz is also irritated by Job’s protestations of innocence. He asks Job how anyone who is a mere man could pretend to be pure – “man that drinketh iniquity like water” (vv.14-16). It is indeed true that no man is pure in the sight of God but, thankfully, as we have seen, the Lord Jesus has taken up our cause.

Vv.17,18 show us that Eliphaz is basing himself on what he has seen and experienced, and what “the fathers” have said. While our own experience is a very valuable thing, it is not necessarily relevant to other people’s situations. Besides, our own experiences are generally very subjective. For the all-important questions with which Job was grappling, *absolute truths and values are needed*, not subjective ones. In moral questions, and in things relating to the purpose of life and to our relationship with, and responsibility towards, God, transcendent values are needed.

It is no good basing ourselves on relative values, on what has been handed down, or happens to be currently accepted by society. Such things have no solid foundation. But God has not left us alone in this regard. We have His word, given to us in the Bible, which explains these things to us. That is why the Lord Jesus described those who heard and did according to His words as builders constructing a house on solid rock – as opposed to those who ignored His words, and were like those who tried to build on sand (see Matthew 7:24-27).

Vv.20-35 are taken up with a graphic description of the woes and torments of the

wicked – with the clear implication that Job must be this type of person!

Job's reply (chs.16,17)

Job tells Eliphaz, “I have heard many such things: miserable comforters are ye all” (16:2). Job's friends had laboured the point that he must be very wicked; hence Job's feeling that he had already heard quite enough. Job says that he, too, could speak like they did, if they were in his situation (v.4). But he adds, “I would strengthen you with my mouth, and the moving of my lips would assuage your grief” (v.5).

Job's words in v.10 remind us of what David, many years later, would say prophetically about the Lord Jesus on the cross. Job says, “They have gaped upon me with their mouth; they have smitten me upon the cheek reproachfully; they have gathered themselves together against me”. So David writes, “They gaped upon me with their mouths” (Psalm 22:13). The adversaries of the Lord Jesus also thought that He was being afflicted by God because of His own wrongdoing (Matthew 27:39-44).

But Isaiah, with true prophetic insight, writes of the Lord Jesus, “Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted” (53:4). The Lord Jesus had no sins of His own that He should be afflicted by God, but He was afflicted for our sins, so that we could be forgiven. Job, by contrast, was not perfect. Yet God was not afflicting him for some specific sin, as Job' friends were suggesting, but rather that Job might learn some fundamental lessons about himself.

The problem was that the more Job's friends insisted that he must be wicked to

deserve all this suffering, the more Job justified himself and wrapped himself up in his own self-righteousness. Thus all were wrong! Job's friends were wrong in accusing Job unjustly, with no evidence that they could show to back up their claims; Job was wrong in insisting that he was pure in the sight of God, and that God, therefore, must be acting unjustly and arbitrarily towards him.

Job speaks of his sufferings and grief (vv.11-16) but insists that he is pure: “Not for any injustice in my hands: also my prayer is pure” (v.17). He longs, therefore, for someone to mediate between himself and God: “Oh that there were arbitration for a man with God, as a son of man for his friend!” (v.21, JND trans.). Job had already expressed such a desire (9:33). As we have seen, the Lord Jesus is that Mediator. In the Gospels, He is often referred to as ‘Son of Man’, and so He is the true Son of Man who can be our Friend and Mediator between God and us, as Job longed to know. He is the One who was described as “a friend of publicans and sinners” (Luke 7:34). How wonderful that He was indeed willing to befriend us sinners, so that we might be brought into a relationship with God, with no fear of judgment!

Job, as yet, did not know these wonderful truths. We can readily know them as we have the inestimable privilege of the complete word of God, the Bible, easily available to us. We can, therefore, take to ourselves the words which the Lord Jesus spoke to His disciples, “But blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear. For verily I say unto you, that many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them; and to hear those

things which ye hear, and have not heard them” (Matthew 13:16,17).

If we have a great privilege, we have a corresponding responsibility. The Lord Jesus sternly rebuked those cities in which He had performed His works of power, but many had not believed. The day of judgment would be more tolerable for Sodom, a city mentioned in the Old Testament that epitomised wickedness, than for Capernaum (Matthew 11:23,24).

So we, too, who have the opportunity to grasp the salvation offered to us by the Lord Jesus, will face severe judgment if we reject that salvation: “Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace?...It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Hebrews 10:29,31).

Job continues his speech in ch.17 by speaking of his sorrows, and complaining about his friends: “But as for you all, do ye return, and come now: for I cannot find one wise man among you” (v.10). In other words, Job would say, “You can keep up your speeches, but they are of no value to me”. Sadly, the arguments between Job and his friends continued for some time, as we shall see later on. Sadly for Job, I say, but happily for us. Every record in the Bible is for our profit (see 2 Timothy 3:16), and we can gain many insights into the broader counsel of God, and His ways with us, even in these seemingly unending speeches!

Bildad's second speech (ch.18)

Bildad, like Eliphaz earlier, was also irritated by Job's previous comments (vv.1-

4). His pride was, no doubt, wounded, but this was no way to comfort a friend! He ends up being sarcastic: “He (i.e. Job) teareth himself in his anger: shall the earth be forsaken for thee? and shall the rock be removed out of his place?” (v.4).

In the remainder of the chapter, Bildad graphically describes the fate of the wicked. Although Bildad was wrong in applying these words to Job, he makes some points that are true. For example, he speaks about how the wicked end up being caught out in their own plans: “his own counsel shall cast him down” (see vv.7-9). By planning some wickedness, and trusting in his own intelligence, the wicked man ends up being destroyed by his own plans. Similarly, in Ezekiel ch.28, the king of Tyre is presented, and it is not difficult to see in him a picture of Satan: “Thine heart was lifted up because of thy beauty; thou hast corrupted thy wisdom by reason of thy brightness” (v.17). Self-occupation, self-delight, and trusting in his own wisdom all led to the devil's downfall. How different is the path of true wisdom: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge” and “Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths” (Proverbs 1:7; 3:5,6).

In v.14, Bildad speaks of “the king of terrors”, i.e. death. Satan uses the fear of death to keep men and women in bondage: “...that through death he (i.e. the Lord Jesus) might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil; and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage” (Hebrews 2:14,15). But if we have trusted the Lord Jesus, death is no more a “king of terrors”, but rather a gateway to life! So

Jesus promises, “I am the resurrection and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live” (John 11:25). We can triumphantly say then, “O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?” (1 Corinthians 15:55).

Job's reply (ch.19)

Job begins by complaining that Bildad and his friends are crushing him, instead of comforting him: “How long will ye vex my soul, and break me in pieces with words?” (v.2). Yet, as Job points out in v.4, all the while that they are insisting that Job must have sinned to deserve this trouble, they cannot specify what it is that he has done. Job, therefore, states that it is God who has overthrown him (v.6), as opposed to it being simply a punishment from God for a particular sin. He claims that God is counting Job as one of His enemies (v.11). How far from the truth this actually was! It is those whom God *loves* that He chastens: “For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth” (Hebrews 12:6; see also Revelation 3:19). Furthermore, we are told what was God's attitude towards us when we were enemies towards Him: “For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son...” (Romans 5:10). In other words, while *we* were at enmity with God, *He* sent His Son to die for our sins, so that we could be reconciled to Him!

Job continues his speech by telling of the pain of seeing friends and family forsake him (vv.13-19). “I am escaped with the skin of my teeth” (v.20) has become proverbial. (It is worth noting that there are many phrases from the Bible which have passed into current speech, though this is

not often realised e.g. ‘scapegoat’, Leviticus 16; ‘the writing on the wall’, Daniel 5; ‘the fly in the ointment’, Ecclesiastes 10.)

In vv.21,22, Job makes his pitiful plea, “Have pity upon me, have pity upon me, O ye my friends; for the hand of God hath touched me. Why do ye persecute me as God, and are not satisfied with my flesh?” How sad to think that Job's friends, who had originally come to comfort him (2:11) could now be so lacking in pity!

We then come to some beautiful verses where we see Job's great faith, despite his lack of understanding: “For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: and though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh I shall see God: whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another; though my reins be consumed within me (or, ‘How my heart yearns within me!’)” Job had a sure hope of his Redeemer, and that he would see Him, even if he died physically. We saw earlier that Job was able to say, “Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him” (13:15).

We too, if we have been redeemed by the precious blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, can have that same certainty of seeing Him after this life on earth is past. Contrast Job's hope with that of the wicked sorcerer, Balaam, who had to say, “I shall see him, but not now: I shall behold him, but not nigh” (Numbers 24:17).

Finally, Job warned his friends that they, too, might well be the subject of God's anger once Job had been dealt with (vv.28,29). This is, in fact, what did happen, as we shall see later on.

Treasures of Love – Part 4

5. The love of believers

George Bell

The writer went to be with his Lord in September 2004. He was a regular contributor to this magazine and this condensed version of his last article, published in April 2002, is reprinted as a token of appreciation. His closing words, ‘Soon we will be in that home of unchanging love’ are particularly poignant.

In preceding articles, we have considered

1. The Father’s love to the Son.
2. The love of the Son to the Father.
3. The Father’s love for His children.
4. The love of the Son for His own.

In this final part of this series, we shall look at the love of believers under two headings:

- a) The love of believers for the Son.
- b) The love of believers for one another.

Love of believers for the Son

“We love him, because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

“If ye love me, keep my commandments” (John 14:15).

To speak of the love of believers for the Son immediately challenges each one of us. How little we dare say! We feel how inadequate is our response to the love of Christ! If only we had a deeper impression of it, perhaps our return to Him would be greater. The first verse quoted above contains a ‘because’ and so highlights the source of the believer’s love. Nothing can compare with His love! His love comes first!

Before moving on, let’s ponder that love for a moment. Often as we gather together to remember Him, we are reminded of those words, “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). We go on to think of the words of the hymn, “Thou for Thine enemies wast slain; what love with Thine can vie?”

1 John 4:19 is worth examining in more detail. In other translations, ‘him’ is omitted from this verse, leaving the object of our love open. It may refer to God, or the Son of God, or to one another. Whoever may be the objects, it is only that divine love shown to us which gives the vital impulse. The words of the Lord Jesus still challenge us: “If ye love me, keep

His love comes first!

my commandments” (John 14:5). They require little comment; love to the Lord is proved by obedience.

Love of believers for one another

So we arrive at the final part of this series on the subject “Treasures of love”. We began with the Father’s love to the Son. Then we saw that we have become the objects of the love of both the Father and the Son. Now, in this final consideration, we are responsible, as loved by God, to show this love to one another. We are all part of the family of God, all sharing the same life. Yet this area of loving one another is so often where we fail! That is why there are so many exhortations to this end. It will be convenient to look at these under six headings.

Discipleship

“A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another, as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another” (John 13:34,35).

The commandments of the law were given to a people unable to keep them. A new commandment is now given. It is new in character, and is given to those who have been born of God. Because they have a new life, they have not only the desire to keep this new commandment, but also the power, as born of God, to do so. The Lord sets the standard for this love: “as I have loved you”!

An important aspect of this love to one another is that it becomes a testimony to all men. It gives a much louder and clearer sound than anything we could say. Our discipleship can be more readily recognised in this way. Love lies behind unity which, too, was meant to be a witness. So the Lord could pray, “That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: *that the world may believe that thou hast sent me*” (John 17:21).

This verse reinforces what has been said, that unity was to be a testimony. This is characteristic of Christianity. It is because of this that Satan has directed his efforts to destroy this unity. We all have our part in this sad tale. So often the flesh has shown itself in its true colours and Satan has taken advantage of the situation to cause havoc. Love for one another will preserve the unity and advance the witness.

Love in the midst of hatred

“These things I command you, that ye love one another. If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you” (John 15:17,18).

*That the world may believe
that Thou hast sent Me*

The Lord's words here underline what He had already said. His command is repeated in v.17. The following verse gives us the dark background. The world hated Christ; it will hate those who love Him. In a world marked by hatred, we are to show our love to one another. This again emphasises the matter of testimony.

Love's obligation

"In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:9,10).

In these verses, the love of God in its wondrous giving is unfolded. V.9 reminds us of the more familiar John 3:16. There are two significant differences.

John 3:16	1 John 4:9
"For God so loved <i>the world</i> "	"...the love of God <i>towards us</i> "
"...but <i>have everlasting life</i> "	"...that we <i>might live through Him</i> "

In John 3: 16, the scope of the love of God is the world. In 1 John 4:9, that love is more circumscribed. It is focussed on us, that is, on believers only. John addresses Christians to assure them that they are the objects of the manifested love of God. This was to have a practical impact on them.

In the second part of John 3:16, we see that God's gift of His only begotten Son has in view that we should have eternal life. However, In John's epistle, we see that God would have us to enjoy this life in a meaningful way now, and to live it out in its fullness.

V.10 reminds us that, before there could be any possession of eternal life, there was the matter of sin to be resolved. So we have propitiation here, that is, the sin question has, indeed, been settled. On the cross of Calvary, the "Son sent" as Man became an offering of such value to God, and brought life to us. We cannot regard this lightly. For the Lord Jesus, it meant those atoning sufferings, of which we understand so little, but which, nevertheless, cause us to worship and adore. But it is John's challenging comment on vv.9,10 which particularly concerns us here: "Beloved, if God so loved us, *we ought also to love one another*" (v.11). There is another reminder of John 3:16 here: compare "God *so* loved the world" with "Beloved, if God *so* loved us". What a great obligation! May we respond to it!

God displayed

"No man has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us" (1 John 4:12).

It is interesting to compare this verse with John 1:18: "No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him". What a wonderful truth! When the Son of God was here on earth, God was fully declared in Him. A full revelation was made! However, He has returned to heaven as Man forever. He is no longer on earth. The question might be asked, Where can God be seen today? The answer is in 1 John 4:12. He is displayed in those who form God's family, as their love for

each other is practised! It is nothing short of a miracle that believers of different nationalities, varying social status, even diverse cultures, are able to exhibit the love of God toward each other.

Love to God proved

“If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?” (1 John 4:20). This verse requires very little comment. It speaks for itself and challenges us all. Loving God and loving one another stand together, and must not be separated! The closing verse of the chapter sums it up: “And this commandment we have from him, That he who loveth God love his brother also” (v.21).

Love practised

“Hereby we have known love, because he has laid down his life for us; and we ought for the brethren to lay down [our lives]. But whoso may have the world’s substance, and see his brother having need, and shut up his bowels from him, how abides the love of God in him?” (1 John 3:16,17, JND trans.).

In v.16, another obligation is placed upon us. This is not optional! The lever for it is that He laid down His life for us. We are to lay down our lives for those who are in need. This does not necessarily mean that we literally lay down our lives for our fellow Christians. It may be so in extreme circumstances. It means that we are committed to do all we can to help those in adversity. Priscilla and Aquila did just this. Paul writes very highly of them: “Who have for my life laid down their necks: unto whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles” (Romans 16:3,4).

V.18 carries on: “My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth.” Talking about loving the brethren is not sufficient! Action is needed! Otherwise, the question may rightly be asked, “How dwelleth the love of God in him?”

Conclusion

In conclusion, may these meditations encourage us to find our true joy in abiding in Christ. Fruitfulness will then be the result. There will also be the satisfaction of a true-hearted response to the Father who seeks worshippers. Soon we will be in that home of unchanging love, the Father’s house. The atmosphere of that home will be love. May we lay hold of His promise, “I will come again, and receive you unto myself: that where I am, there ye may be also” (John 14:3).

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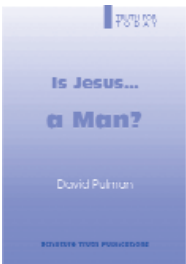
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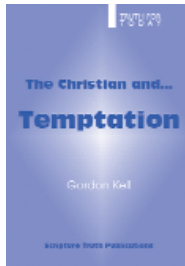
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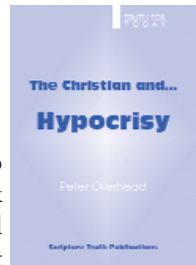
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