



Scripture Truth

January – March 2007

The Sight of Heaven
The God of All Grace
How To Study the Bible
The Sure Purposes of God
A Look at Nehemiah for Today

SCRIPTURE TRUTH

Editor: Theo Balderston

SCRIPTURE TRUTH is published every three months to expound the teaching of the Scriptures so that we “may be thoroughly equipped for every good work”.

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All correspondence should be addressed to:

SCRIPTURE TRUTH Publications

Coopies Way, Coopies Lane, MORPETH, Northumberland NE61 6JN

Tel: 01670 511615

Fax: 01670 516620

How to...

Part 2: How to pray

Gordon Kell

There is no failure as serious as failure in prayer-life, since all the other failures spring from it. I found this article, originally a talk on the Truth for Today programme for London's Premier Radio (www.truthfortoday.org.uk), a challenging refresher-course.

“As it is the business of tailors to make clothes and of cobblers to mend shoes, so it is the business of Christians to pray.” So Martin Luther said. Through prayer we praise, worship and commune with God. Through prayer we ask God to bless our fellow men, our fellow Christians and ourselves. Through prayer we bring the power of heaven down to earth. Prayer is the very essence of our faith. This is what the example of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself shows. Praying with others is a vital subject. But this article focuses on personal prayer.

The Lord Jesus prayed

Prayer pervaded every aspect of the Lord's life, and the Bible record of this begins with His baptism: “[I]t came to pass that Jesus also was baptized; and while he prayed, the heaven was opened” (Luke 3:21). So today, prayer opens heaven to us. Prayer also needs a quiet place. “So he himself often withdrew into the wilderness and prayed” (Luke 5:16). Prayer involves commitment. “Now it came to pass in those days that he went out to the mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God” (Luke 6:12). Prayer changes us. “And it came to pass, about eight days after these sayings, that he took Peter, John, and James and went up on the mountain to pray. And as he prayed, the appearance of his face was altered, and his robe became white and glistening” (Luke 9:28-29).

The Lord's constant prayerfulness caused one of His disciples to ask Him, “Lord, teach us to pray...” (Luke 11:1). They witnessed the closeness of the Lord Jesus to His Father and wanted to experience the same kind of communion with God. This is where an effective prayer-life starts. Do we want to experience real communion with God? Prayer is not about asking God for

*Prayer
opens
heaven
to us*

*Prayer
changes
us*

*Lord,
teach us
to pray*

things, although it sometimes includes this. Prayer is about a living relationship with the God who loves us and wants us to enjoy His presence and His power. This, of course, means that we have to be ready to do His will.

Although the disciples quickly wanted to be taught to pray, they only learned the true depths of prayer in discovering the depth of the Lord's love for them expressed through His intercession and sacrifice. They learned that, in spite of the fact that Peter was to deny his Lord, Jesus had already prayed for him that his faith would not fail; and that, when he was restored, he might be a source of encouragement to his brethren (Luke 2:32). It is a beautiful example of the Lord's service of intercession: intercession is to pray on the behalf of others, and it is service the Lord Jesus still continues to this day. In the words of Hebrews 7:25, "Therefore he is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through him, since he ever lives to make intercession for them."

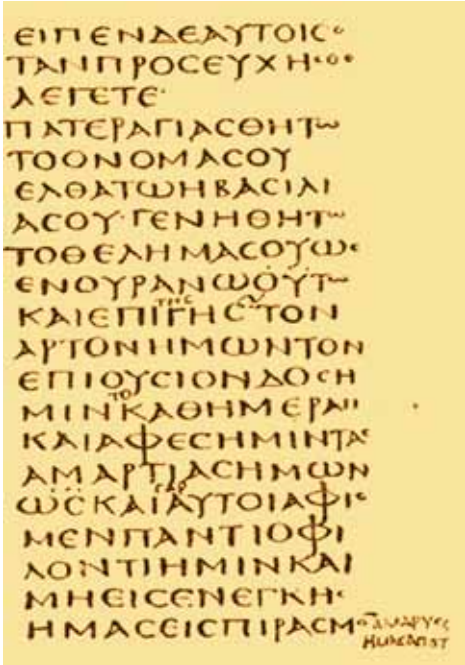
But it was in the Garden of Gethsemane that Peter, James and John saw the true nature of prayer. Jesus expressed this in His prayer to the Father, "...not as I will, but as you will" (Matthew 26:39). Prayer is about discovering and doing God's will. Once the holy matter of His sacrifice had been settled in the Father's presence, Jesus finishes praying and goes on to the cross, "Shall I not drink the cup which My Father has given me?" (John 18:11).

We should pray

The apostles prayed; the early church prayed; Paul prayed; we should pray. In the first chapter of Acts we see the apostles praying together: "These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers" (Acts 1:14). Not long after we see prayer as a key feature of the newly-formed church: "And they continued steadfastly in... prayers" (Acts 2:42). Paul often prayed for the people of God: "For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding" (Colossians 1:9). He also asked for prayer, "[M]eanwhile praying also for us, that God would open to us a door for the word, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am also in chains" (Colossians 4:3).

We should pray. Why is it that people who are not Christians instinctively pray in crisis situations? Human beings are made to have fellowship with God and even though they live lives far from Him, in times of danger they often instinctively appeal to Him. When we are born again, the Spirit of God within us moves us to pray. We should never lose that simplicity of heart and expression when praying to our Father.

Then how should we pray? A drunken fish merchant once stumbled into a Gospel hall. The preacher spent a lot of time explaining the Gospel to him, and the Spirit of God worked in his heart so that he trusted Christ. When, late that night, he told his wife he had become a Christian, her response was, "Drunk again!" But as they got



Luke 11:1-4 (Codex Sinaiticus)

ready to go to bed he said to his wife that they should pray. But how? He had never prayed in his life before. After a few moments he took his hat, swung it in the air just as he had often done at football matches, and exclaimed, “Hurrah for Jesus!” That was a good first prayer. Prayer should be instinctive.

The Lord’s prayer

However, prayer also needs to be taught, which is why one of the disciples asked, “Lord, teach us to pray”. The Lord’s reply gave us what has become known as “the Lord’s Prayer” (Luke 11:1-4).

Its opening words – “Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come” – bring God’s person, God’s home and God’s honour, to our attention. The prayer teaches us that we have a relationship with God as our Father. It is a relationship of nearness but there is also a sense of God’s greatness and holiness. We

should never take God for granted or cease to be reverent in His presence.

There is also an understanding of where God is – in heaven. Prayer makes the great link between heaven and earth. Even in today’s world, with its bewildering range of technology, sometimes communications break down. But we never lose our connection with God. He is always there to listen and to respond to our prayers. “For the eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their prayers” (1 Peter 3:12).

The Lord’s Prayer also expresses a desire for God’s kingdom to come. Prayer should look forward to the hope of Christ’s return and the promise of the establishment of His kingdom on earth. Does this hope colour our prayers? Do we pray in view of a coming kingdom? And do we also look for God to be glorified in our lives *now* as He will be glorified in the future?

The Lord’s Prayer then turns to God’s will. “Your will be done, On earth as it is in heaven” (Luke 11:2). This is a very powerful part of the Prayer. As we have seen, the Lord Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane for the Father’s will to be done. In this prayer, too, the will of God is central. It is in the light of God’s will that the prayer then turns to daily provision, forgiveness and deliverance before ending with God’s kingdom, God’s power and God’s glory.

God does provide for our daily needs and we should not forget to ask Him for them, and to thank Him for the blessings we receive. A Christian farmer was once invited to a banquet along with other well-educated but ill-mannered guests. At the beginning of the meal the farmer bowed his head and gave thanks for the meal. One of the guests scornfully asked him if everyone down on the farm did that. “No,” replied the farmer, “the animals never give thanks!” Ungodliness is marked by unthankfulness. Paul reminded the Colossians, “And let the peace of God rule in your hearts..., and be thankful” (Colossians 3:15). Our prayers should always express thankfulness. “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God” (Philippians 4:6).

The need and willingness to forgive is the next aspect of the Lord’s Prayer. The Lord Jesus teaches that we need to confess our sins but also to be willing to forgive others, thereby displaying the character of God revealed in Himself. So too Paul: “[B]earing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do” (Colossians 3:13).

The prayer goes on to the importance of being kept from temptation and the evil one. Once, when Winston Churchill was campaigning in an election in Oldham he asked a man if he could count on his support? “Vote for you!” exclaimed the man, “I would rather vote for the devil!” To which Churchill replied, “As far as I know the devil is not standing in this election so perhaps you might vote for me!” Too often we can unintentionally “vote for the devil”. Prayer is what keeps us from the evil one and away from spiritual and moral dangers.

The Lord’s Prayer ends with God’s Kingdom, God’s Power and God’s Glory. It ends in worship. The Lord’s Prayer focuses on God’s interests, yet in doing so ensures God’s blessing in my life. This is the great lesson about prayer that the Lord teaches us: that as a consequence of seeking God’s will and glory we are blessed.

Praying in Jesus’ Name

In the Bible, as we have just seen, prayer is generally addressed to God the Father. The Lord Jesus teaches us to pray in His name in John 14:13: “And whatever you ask in my name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son.” However there are also examples of addressing our prayers to the Lord Jesus. In Acts 7:59, Stephen prays, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit”. Paul writes, “Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me” (2 Corinthians 12:8).

It is striking that nowhere in the New Testament do we find the Holy Spirit being addressed in prayer. He indwells us and is with us as Jesus explains in John 14:16-17. The reason why He is never addressed directly in prayer may be that He is intimately involved with the ministry of intercession on our behalf. “Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered” (Rom. 8:26). It is the work of the Holy Spirit to interpret our needs and to

intercede for us. On those occasions when we cannot express the depth of the feelings in our hearts, it is the Spirit of God who has the power to communicate our need.

Just as the Holy Spirit in us intercedes for us on earth, we also have a Great High Priest who intercedes in heaven: “Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through him, since he ever lives to make intercession for them” (Hebrews 7:25). This ministry of intercession by both the Son of God and the Spirit of God should encourage us to “come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:16). In doing so not only will we know the power of God in our lives but also the joy which Christ wants us to experience, “And in that day you will ask me nothing. Most assuredly, I say to you, whatever you ask the Father in my name he will give you. Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full” (John 16:23-24).

Praying believingly

There are some other essential features of prayer. Praying believingly is one. The Lord Jesus said, “And all things whatever you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive” (Matthew 21:22). “But without faith it is impossible to please him, for he who comes to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of those who diligently seek him” (Hebrews 11:6). It has been said that prayer is the key to heaven and faith is the hand that turns that key.

Praying persistently

We also need to be persistent in our prayers. In Luke 18:1-8 Jesus tells the story of the widow who persistently pleaded for justice from an unjust judge until he answered her cry. He finishes the story with the words, “And shall God not avenge his own elect who cry out day and night to him, though he bears long with them?” Patience is a great characteristic of the Christian faith, and one which we often learn through a patient prayer life. God teaches us to wait His time and discover that His timing is always perfect.

James uses the example of Elijah to teach persistence in prayer. “The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit” (James 5:16-18). This passage confirms another secret of an effective prayer life, namely, a righteous life – i.e. one consistent with the will of God. It is no use expecting God to answer our prayers if we are not living lives consistent with following Christ. Similarly, it is no use speaking about the love of God if I refuse to forgive; and it is no use speaking about the holiness of God if I am dishonest.

Praying fervently

James also uses the example of Elijah to teach fervency in prayer. To Elijah, praying was hard work that needed effort. This challenges my heart when I analyse how much

effort I put into praying. Great blessing comes through great praying and, like Elijah, this can begin in the heart of just one person. I remember a young Christian girl who suggested to her friends that they should meet to pray before work each morning. We young men did not think this was a great idea: we had enough problems getting up in the morning! But we agreed and from those early-morning prayer meetings several young people were led to Christ and several more grew as believers. The word “fervent” has the idea of stretching – of using your strength to reach out. That is exactly what God wants us to do. He wants us to reach out to Him and prove His ability to bless. This takes time, effort and strength, but if we are to know God’s power we need to make this sacrifice.

Praying clearly

Hannah teaches us about praying with clarity of objective (1 Samuel 1:12-13). Over time we can develop an unclear prayer jargon in our “conversation” with God. Hannah came into God’s presence with a great sense of burden and knew that only God Himself could answer her need. Because of this, her prayer had a clear, focused point. Do we approach God as Hannah did? Do we have the same sense of bringing our needs and those of others to the throne of grace because there is no other place where they can be met? Hannah shed tears. Do we feel deeply about the matters we lay out before the Lord, or are they simply a well-worn list? Hannah spoke in her heart. Do we understand that, “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, A broken and a contrite heart – These, O God, you will not despise” (Psalm 51:17)? For, as Samuel, Hannah’s son, learned in older life, “[T]he 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).

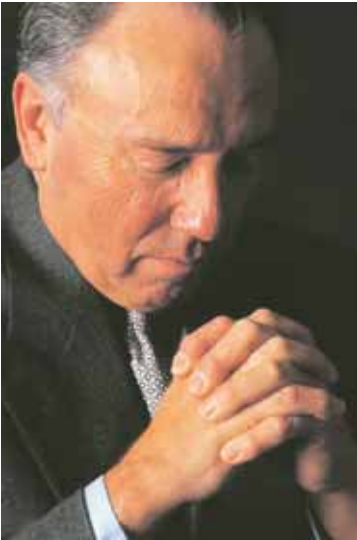
Hannah asked for what she wanted. Hers was a simple, straightforward prayer. The Lord taught succinctness in prayer: “But when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words” (Matthew 6:7). Hannah prayed quietly and privately – not like the Pharisees who

loved to be seen at street corners praying. God is not interested in outward display but in simple quiet faith. Finally, Hannah finished praying. It should be part of our experience to leave a matter before the Lord, having prayed for it, and then to wait for His answer.

Praying systematically

There are two ways to pray: systematically and spontaneously. Daniel gives us a great example of the former. “And in his upper room, with his





windows open toward Jerusalem, he knelt down on his knees three times that day, and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as was his custom since early days” (Daniel 6:10). It is a good thing to plan your prayers, especially at the beginning and end of the day. At the beginning, because you want God to go before you and to guide you into His will. Every day is a fresh opportunity to serve and live for God and every day we need His presence. At the end of the day we can review the activities we have engaged in – what we can give thanks for; what mistakes we made; what needs arose; what plans we have.

Praying spontaneously

But there is also a need for spontaneous prayer. Nehemiah gives us a great example of *this*: “Then the king said to me, ‘What do you request?’ So I prayed to the God of heaven. And I said to the king ...” (Nehemiah 2:4-5). Nehemiah was sorrowful because of the state of Jerusalem, and the king asked him what he wanted to do. Instantly Nehemiah prayed to God and immediately spoke to the king. There will be times when we need God’s immediate help. At such times we can send these arrow-like prayers to heaven.

God always hears the cries of His people. Sometimes He delivers them and sometimes He allows them to suffer in a righteous cause. We see this in Daniel’s friends. “Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego answered and said to the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us from your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up” (Daniel 3:16-18). These three men were convinced that God was with them even though they had to go through the experience of the fiery furnace. Equally God answers our prayers in different ways. Sometimes He takes difficulties away, but sometimes Christ goes with us *in* those difficulties, as verse 25 of this chapter shows.

The priority of prayer

George Muller was a remarkable man of prayer but also practical about it. He advised Christians to begin the day early with prayer and suggested that the best aid to this was investing in a good alarm clock to inculcate the habit of early rising! Samuel Chadwick said, “The one concern of the devil is to keep the saints from praying. He fears nothing from prayerless studies, prayerless work, prayerless religion. He laughs at our toil, he mocks at our wisdom, but he trembles when we pray.”

It’s time to buy that alarm clock!

A Look At Nehemiah For Today

Part 10: Obedience and Refreshing (8:13-18)

Ted Murray

The people who gathered together in Jerusalem asked for the Word of God to be read to them because they wanted to obey it. As this article shows, God brought blessing and refreshing out of this obedience. There's a vital lesson here!

Asking for more

“Bring the Book!” What a request! It was what those returnee Jews asked for who on the feast day of the seventh month assembled “as one man” in the open square before the Water Gate (Nehemiah 8:1). When Ezra started to read “the book”, they answered, “Amen! Amen!” as with hands uplifted but faces towards the ground they worshipped the Lord (v.6). From early morning to mid-day they stood listening to the reading of the Word. As H.A. Ironside noted, it had six different effects on them that day, namely, uniting; desiring; solemnizing; reverencing; refreshing; and, finally, obeying. And as they heard the Levites explaining the sense of the Word, their sorrow was turned to joy: “The joy of the Lord is your strength” (v.10).

Then they asked for more of the same on day two (v.13)! Reading produced in the people a deep desire to understand the words of the Law. Is *our* desire to please the Lord who has saved, redeemed, and reconciled us to God? Well, in order to carry out this desire, we too have to be aware of what is, and what is not, pleasing to the Lord. We become aware of these requirements by reading, understanding, and obeying His Word.

Reading and intellectual understanding are readily embraced by many Christians today. But, sadly, *obedience* to the Word is often overlooked. It seems that, as long as we are happy in our fellowship, or assembly life, it doesn't matter whether we are fully obedient to God's Word or not. How often do we hear the phrase, “but we have found happy fellowship!” from someone who has departed for “pastures new”, where the truths that they once held dear are not fully adhered to. The whole object of the reading of God's Word, on that first day of the seventh month, was that it would result in obedience.

We too, in our day, must realise that the Word of God is not only the Word in which we find the way of salvation, but also the Word of our instruction, and a manual for our lives as Christians. “For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope” (Romans 15:4). In the letters to the seven churches, the Lord writes to the church at Philadelphia, “I know your works. See, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it; for you have a little strength, have kept my word, and have

not denied my name” (Revelation 3:8). Obedience to His Word was what won His commendation. Too often we read the Bible like a novel or history book, something we can take or leave as it suits us. Little do we realise the *power* it has within it. “For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12). Sadly, some neglect serious reading and understanding the Word, and the benefits of this. James has words about this neglect. “For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was” (James 1:23). In other words, the Word of God hasn’t had an effect on that person’s life. The challenge to us today is, are we affected by the Word of God as it is read and ministered? Too often, we feast on “roast preachers”: we appraise their style, presentation, and delivery, but do not digest what has been made available for our instruction and encouragement from the Word of God!

Obedience at the feast

There was a period of 13 days between verses 15 and 16 of Nehemiah 8 (compare Leviticus 23:34). During this period the proclamation went out to all Jerusalem and to the cities and villages round about, that on the fifteenth day of the month the celebration of the feast would take place. No doubt some in those places had not attended the Bible reading and were startled by the procla-

mation, and had to be persuaded to keep the feast. Similarly, there are those today who rarely attend the reading or ministry meetings, and consequently do not fully appreciate why we gather in simplicity to the Lord’s Name. There is a need to renew the proclamation, reaffirm the truths believed and announce plainly why we meet in the way we do, and what the basis is for this stand. Many in Christendom, mistakenly, think it is because we like a meditative approach to worship, that we hold a Breaking of Bread on Lord’s Day morning, without priests, an announced order of service, or any musical accompaniment. They do not fully realise the basis of our gathering.

As a result of the proclamation the Feast of Tabernacles was celebrated in the prescribed manner for the first time since the days of Joshua (see Numbers 29:12-39). The returnees from Babylon had previously celebrated the feast (Ezra 3:4), but not in the prescribed manner. Often we are also guilty of celebrating the feast in a way that is unfitting for the occasion. We lack the preparedness, and the time for quiet meditation before the meeting. We come in at the last minute, or late.

The people did not come empty-handed. Receiving instructions to bring branches of olive, palm and myrtle trees and make booths (Nehemiah 8:15), this they did. These three trees, we are told, differ in their heights when full grown, and in what they bear. [See *Bible Plants, Fruits and Products* by Tom H. Radcliffe, available from STP.]

The palm tree grows to about twelve metres, (40 ft) and produces dates. This



signifies effort in order to produce the sweet fruit. The olive tree is not so tall, about five metres (16-17 ft), but it has to be regularly pruned to keep the head compact. It is a long-lived tree whose primary purpose is to produce oil, though the fruit can also be eaten as it is. The fruit is harvested by beating the tree, then the olives are pressed for oil: this, again, speaks to us of effort. Finally, the myrtle is a bush about two metres high (6-7 ft), producing fragrant flowers in summer. In this tree we find something that attracts and is for display. As we ponder these three trees, they suggest a lesson for ourselves. We, too, have to gather together something to bring with us, when we come together to meet with the Lord's

people. So often we come empty-handed when we meet around the Lord's table, and have nothing for the Lord, so that the meeting suffers. The remedy for this is the effort that the palm and olive tree symbolize: only through effort do we enjoy the sweetness of the things of Christ. This is the constant task that we have to undertake in order not to quench the Spirit. We also have to keep our eyes fixed on the Lord in His glory and beauty – the myrtle tree. It is then, and only then, that we can prove and enjoy the promise that Paul makes when writing to the Corinthians, "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, Nor have entered into the heart of man, The things which God has prepared for those that love Him" (1 Corinthians 2:9).

Oh, fix our earnest gaze
So wholly, Lord, on Thee,
That, with Thy beauty occupied,
We elsewhere none may see.



Myrtle



**An old olive tree in
the Garden of Gethsemene**

“Then the people went out and brought them and made themselves booths” (Nehemiah 8:16). They were obedient to the instructions, and made space for the obedience of others. The booths were erected on housetops, courtyards and in the open squares of the Water Gate and the Gate of Ephraim. The housetops suggest the people of Jerusalem attending to their own obedience in this matter, the courtyards, perhaps their relatives or friends, and the open squares those from a distance. But all of the booths were built within the confines of Jerusalem. Being within the walls offered the blessings of safety and security to any visitors. And as the mere sight of Jerusalem brought a sense of relief to the traveller (Psalm 125:1-2), how much more would that sense be enhanced by tabernacling within the walls! Analogously to the days

of Nehemiah, we realize in our day that in Christ, Mount Zion, we too have safety and security, and this enables us able to express the joy that our salvation brings. The Feast of Tabernacles was a joyful time: a time to remember how God had redeemed, cared for, fed, and preserved the nation: “And there was very great gladness” (v.17). Surely, as we recall redemption’s story, and realise what we have been brought into, having been forgiven, reconciled, justified, and sanctified to God, and as we think about the One who has brought it all about, we should rejoice with similar “joy inexpressible and full of glory” (1 Peter 1:8).

A whole week of the Bible

They kept the feast for the prescribed seven days (Nehemiah 8:18). For seven days the Word was read; for seven days they listened intently. These “seven days” look forward to the day of the Kingdom, when the Prince of Peace will have revealed Himself in all His glory, and have set up His Kingdom. His authority having been established, the nation of Israel will be at peace and there will be gladness in the land, as Israel obeys the Word of the Lord. For our present lesson, the emphasis of verse 18 should be placed on the Word being read each day. In the earlier celebration of the feast of Tabernacles immediately after the original return from Babylon (Ezra 3:4), the emphasis had been on the sacrifices. We might ask, why the change in emphasis? The answer surely is that in times of revival different truths are brought to the fore. Unlike Ezra 3:4, Nehemiah 8 has occupied us with the importance of God’s Word. The lesson for us today, as

we are privileged to handle the word of God, concerns how we treat it, heed it and obey it. The Jews of Nehemiah's day can certainly teach us that lesson. They *honoured* the word: they stood up when it was opened (v.5). They *listened* when it was read, and desired to understand it when it was expounded (vv. 2-3; 7-8; 12-13). They *rejoiced* when they understood it (v.12), and, finally, they *obeyed* it (v.17). Sadly, we live in a day when the Word is denied, watered down and in some cases ignored. When this is the case, there is no testimony, no harmony, no security, and no joy. The important lesson for us is to become re-acquainted with the Word; to honour it, for it is where God has revealed His purposes; to heed it, for it is our guide; to listen to it, for it is the source of knowledge; to obey it, for it is our source of joy.

And an eighth day

And on the eighth day there was a sacred assembly – a new beginning, a new day (v.18). This speaks of an eternal day that is yet to come, when the new heavens and new earth will have been established, Satan having been cast into the lake of fire (Revelation chs. 20, 21). It will be the day when tears, sorrow, and death will have been done away, when the words recorded for us in Revelation 21:1-5 will have been fulfilled, when the marriage of the Lamb will have come, and the Church will have been displayed as the bride adorned for her Husband. Then God will be all and in all. All this is future, but we see the start of it on the glorious resurrection day. The commencement of the eighth day for us was when Christ was raised from the dead.

This was the day that the victory was won. His words to the disciples that day were, "Peace be with you" (John 20:19), and, thank God, those words are still the same today for every believer. Three times in that chapter of John's Gospel the Lord granted his disciples peace. We can enjoy that peace today – in part. "And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:7). The hymn writer, knowing something of the peace and love of God that is found in our Lord Jesus Christ, wrote:

Father! Thine own unbounded love
Has reached us through Thy Son;
We now behold Him crowned above,
Eternity's begun.

As we continue to testify for our faith in the day in which we live, and whilst we look onto that day of wondrous promise, let us, like the people of Nehemiah's day, respect, reverence, heed, and obey God's Word.

They honoured the word

They listened

They rejoiced

The Sure Purposes of God

Part 3: Jericho

Jim Wolf

Truths are clarified by their opposites. Previous studies in this series focused on Hebron as the place of blessing and friendship with God. This one studies a place where the people of God could not be cursed but could be corrupted, and a place which God cursed, yet which was the scene of amazing grace.

Introduction

“I will sing of mercy and judgment” (Psalm 101:1).

“Now Hebron was built seven years before Zoan in Egypt” (Numbers 13:22).

Cursing and blessing, defiance and mercy are the solemn subjects of this article. It will consider places which typify both the defiance of the known will and purposes of God, and the judgment that this defiance brings. These places are Jericho and the Moabite land opposite it across the Jordan. Balak demanded, “Curse this people for me” (Numbers 22:6); and Jericho became “the place of the curse”. But Balaam could not curse those whom God had blessed, and even in “the place of the curse”, the mercy of God was at work. On the plains of Moab God’s purposes could not be frustrated, and in Jericho God’s sure purposes were also being worked out.

The first mention of Jericho in the Bible is to identify where Israel was camped on the plains of Moab (Numbers 22:1). It suggests some affiliation between the two places.

Balaam’s defeat and Balaam’s success

Balak, the king of Moab, was distraught by the victories of Israel, especially over the neighbouring Amorites (Numbers 21; 22:2-3), and sought to buy Balaam’s services: Balaam was evidently known as a prophet who could be bought. How often, even in our “enlightened” days, do people set great store on the consultation of such people! “Come curse these people, for I know that whoever you curse *will* be cursed and maybe I can weaken them enough to prevail.” With words to this effect, accompanied by gifts and the promise of great wealth, Balak tried to buy Balaam. How surprised he must have been when Balaam refused, on the grounds that God would not allow it! But, worshipper of Baal as he was, Balak did not allow this news to stop him from knowingly and defiantly pursuing the course that God had refused. Nor did it stop Balaam. Though he had a direct relationship with God, Balaam had the same spirit as Balak, for he still went with Balak even though God had revealed to him His mind with regard to Israel. God’s judgment was foretold both by the angel with the drawn sword in his hand and by the miraculous way in which God opened the ass’s mouth. And yet surely Balaam also experienced the mercy of God: he disobeyed, yet was still used in the purposes of God (Numbers 22:22-35).

Why did Balaam not heed the lessons so plainly shown to him? The three references to Balaam in the New Testament provide an answer to this question.

Firstly, 2 Peter 2:15 speaks of “the way of Balaam.” What this “way” was, is shown in verses 10-14 of the same chapter: “Them that walk after the flesh in the lust of uncleanness...natural brute beasts...spots and blemishes... a heart... exercised with covetous practices”. Balaam was one of those hireling shepherds the Lord spoke of, who cared not for the safety or well-being of the flock – a prophet anxious to make gain from his gift (John 10:12-13). In the professing church today we need not look very hard to see examples of hireling shepherds. Let us rather be like the “shepherds” in 1 Peter 5:2 who feed the flock of God, not for gain, but as examples! The reward is far greater. “When the chief Shepherd shall appear, you will receive a crown of glory that fades not away.”

Secondly, Jude verse 11 speaks of “the error of Balaam”. This denotes man trying through natural reasoning and his own ideas of morality to work out what *he* thinks God will do. Balaam saw error and evil in Israel and thought that God would surely tell him to curse them. According to his reasoning this would be only right and proper. He was blind to the purposes of God and to the way in which He imposes His will, His judgments and His mercy with perfect justness and righteousness.

Thirdly, in Revelation 2:14 the Lord, through John, spoke of “the doctrine of Balaam,” that was held by some members of the church in Pergamum. Pergamum typifies the church as settled in the world, just as Balaam was a prophet of the LORD who went on, after his failure to curse Israel, to find a way to profit by becoming the advisor of an idolater. His advice to the king of Moab was to allow Israel to remain on his territory, to integrate and inter-marry with his people. Very soon we see that although Israel could not be cursed because God would not allow it, they could be corrupted, and began to worship the false gods of Moab (Numbers 31:16; 25:1-3). They abandoned their pilgrim character and their vision of the land promised to them by God. It hardly needs saying that when we look around us at the professing church as a whole, it has indeed settled down in the world and desires and tolerates the things associated with the world. Never let us give up our pilgrim character, our dependence on the Lord and our vision of the glorified Lord!

In this way, though always blessed in the purpose of God, Israel was, in its own experience, defeated on the plains of Moab. Happily, Deuteronomy 34:1-3 describes another Israelite whose situation was also “over against Jericho”. But he was not on a level with Jericho on “the plains of Moab”; instead, he was elevated high above it, on Mount Pisgah. As God called Moses to Himself, He took him up there and showed him all the lands that Israel would have for a possession – and notable among them was “the plain of Jericho, the city of palms trees”. From this elevation he could see Jericho and its environs as God saw them. Happy the Christian who can see the *present* character of the world as “the place of the curse”, as God shows it to him, and also,

by faith, both the *future* end to which this character will bring it, and, finally, the grace, too, that is exhibited there!

Israel's transformation

God intervened in “severe mercy” to remove the defilement on the plains of Moab (Numbers 25:6-13). But more had to happen to transform Israel into the nation that could participate in the judgment of Jericho. To get to Jericho from Moab, Israel had to cross Jordan in a particular manner. “When they arrived at Jordan, the ark was carried by the priests 2000 cubits in front of the host that they might know the way they must go and the ark remained on the shoulders of the priests in the bed of the river until all had passed over. This typifies association with Christ’s death and resurrection” (*Morrish Concise Bible Dictionary*).

We can readily see the association of going through the waters, (or where the water should have been but for God’s mighty power) as typifying death, and that coming up the banks of Jordan was representative of an entering into newness of life (resurrection).

It was, figuratively, a new Israel that stepped out on to the western bank of Jordan.

The typical teaching of what happened next, as given in Joshua 4:20-5:15, completes the account of Israel’s transformation from defeat to victory. The first thing that God sees to is remembrance. The twelve stones taken out of Jordan (Joshua 4:2-8) were to be used as a remembrance to the generations to come. It shows the importance of remembrance to the heart of God. How neglected this precious truth is in Christendom as a whole today! The blessed Lord asked us to remember Him in his death, graphically represented in our passage by the forbearance of the priests, who carried the ark, standing immovably between the people and the waters of death, until all of them were over. Had they moved out while some were still crossing, the waters would have come flooding back. How blessed it is that Christ endured the cross until He cried, “It is finished”, and all was accomplished for redemption, once and for all. How important is it to us to remember the Lord in the way that He asked us by breaking bread and drinking wine in fellowship with our brethren, He Himself being in the midst!

If remembrance was first, circumcision was next. Circumcision denotes the cutting away of “the flesh”, a term which equates to the natural world at enmity against God and the things in us naturally that answer to that world. During the forty years in the wilderness this ritual, established by Abraham, had not been carried out. Now that they had entered the land, immediately they needed to be taught that they were to be separated to God. They were not to be counted among the nations. When God saw their obedience to this command He proclaimed that the reproach of Egypt had been rolled away from the children of Israel – which is why they called the place Gilgal, or “rolled” (Joshua 5:9).

The present-day counterpart of Gilgal is Paul telling the Philippians, “For we are the circumcision, which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh... For our conversation [“citizenship”] is in heaven, from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself” (Philippians 3:3, 20-21). In the truth of this we can resist the seductions of Moab and be ready to take possession of our promises.

But one further item of preparation was necessary – the reassurance of Joshua. Perhaps worried about what was to happen next, he seems to have walked over towards Jericho (Joshua 5:1). How wonderfully gracious God was to him! You can almost hear God saying, “Poor old Joshua, he needs a bit of a hand here”. Joshua looked! What was this? A man with a drawn sword in his hand (Joshua 5:13-14)! Balaam had seen an *angel* with a drawn sword – denoting judgment – and an ass speaking – denoting mercy. Here it was a *man* who answers Joshua’s question, “Art thou for us, or for our adversaries?” The answer is quite unexpected; “Nay, but as captain of the host of the LORD am I now come.” Joshua had no doubt about whom he was speaking to, for he fell on his face and worshipped. He was indeed on holy ground, as Moses and others had been before him. These appearances of God, or “theophanies”, are remarkable occurrences which seem to have happened at times of special need. With Moses at the “burning bush”, it was to give him his commission to lead the children of Israel out of Egypt. On this occasion it was to show Joshua that nothing is impossible with God. It was not only Joshua and the Israelites that were going up against the city of Jericho but the “Lord’s Host” was going to accomplish this great victory.

With this, the transformation of the defeated Israel into the victorious Israel that participated in the destruction of Jericho was complete. And how much more should our transformation be complete by the sight of the Lord Jesus as the Lord of Glory, who is at the right hand of the Majesty on High! He is looking down on those for whom He died, and He knows our every weakness and anticipates our needs before we ask or think. He is, indeed, a wonderful Saviour and we are privileged to call Him our Lord and in spirit take off the shoes from our feet and worship.

Judgment and mercy at Jericho

And now came the destruction of Jericho itself, described in Joshua 6. It exemplifies the immutability of God’s judgment upon those who oppose his will. Already, even before its collapse, Jericho was ‘securely shut up’ (6:1) in dread of the immense host that had passed dry-shod across Jordan. And now Joshua proclaimed that “the city shall be accursed, even it and all that are therein, to the LORD” (6:17). We all know

Judgment and mercy

the story of how for six days the people compassed the walls about with the ark, once daily, making no noise except that of the trumpets blown by the priests. And how on the seventh day they rose early in the morning and compassed the city seven times, and how all the people shouted when the priests blew the trumpets and as Joshua proclaimed that Lord had given them the city.

In 6:26 Joshua went further, and declared, “Cursed be the man... that riseth up and buildeth this city, Jericho”. This was verified in the family of Hiel of Bethel who did rebuild it in Ahab’s time (1 Kings 16:34). But what of mercy? Yes indeed! One person *was* shown mercy! Joshua’s very pronouncement of the curse in verse 17 was immediately followed by the exception, “Only Rahab the harlot shall live, she and all that are with her in the house...”. One person out of the thousands in that great city found grace in the sight of God because of her clear understanding *by faith* of the inevitability of the victory that would follow. We read in Hebrews 11:31, “By faith the harlot, Rahab, perished not with them that believed not, when she had received the spies in peace”. The immeasurability of grace is exemplified in the extent of her blessing. From Matthew 1:5 and the descent which (it seems) Mary, too, had from David (Luke 3:31), it would follow that Rahab was an ancestress of both Mary and Joseph, and thus doubly an ancestress of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

And that mercy continues to sweeten the history of Jericho even when defiantly rebuilt. It was seen at Jericho following Elijah’s last journey (2 Kings 2). This took him by way of Gilgal, Bethel and Jericho across the Jordan to a spot where the chariot of fire took him to heaven. We can say that Elijah’s last journey pre-typified the history of Christ. He went *via* the place of circumcision (Gilgal), which reminds us of the separation to God of the One who was cast upon God from the womb (Psalm 22:10); *via* “the house of God” (Bethel), speaking of God in Christ reconciling the world to Himself (2 Corinthians 5:19); *via* the place of the curse (Jericho), speaking of the place where our Lord was made a curse for us that we might be freed from the curse

of sin. He crossed the Jordan which, as we have seen, speaks of Christ’s death that robbed death of its power for us; and finally ascended by the chariot of fire, speaking of our Lord’s ascension into glory to take up His place at the Father’s right hand.

What was the result of this progress of Elijah? Elisha’s ministry of mercy and grace! Elijah’s ministry had been one of judgment, but Elisha took up the mantle, went back to Jericho, and started *his* ministry with an act of blessing in the place of the curse: he healed the bad waters



Elisha’s Fountain, Jericho

(2 Kings 2:19-22). His ministry was not without its judgmental episodes (2 Kings 2:23-24), but its hallmark was grace.

Neither did the curse on the city of Jericho hinder the Lord Jesus from going there. People were there who needed mercy and healing. So we find Him asking Bartimaeus, “What wilt thou that I should do unto thee?” (Mark 10:46-52). We hear the beggar’s reply, “Lord, that I might receive my sight”, and the Lord’s immediate response, “Thy faith has made thee whole”. Immediately his sight was restored and he followed Jesus. Wonderful blessing in the city of the curse! Mark 10:1 tells us that on this occasion Jesus had come from the farther side of Jordan. Therefore, to get to Jericho he had had to pass over the Jordan. If there was to be any lasting blessing it had to be through going down into the death that this crossing typifies, and bearing the curse that “the city of the curse” typifies. Therefore the blessing in Jericho depended on all that our Lord’s journey to that city typically set forth.

As we ponder these things, well might we say, with the psalmist, “I will sing of mercy and of judgment” (Psalm 101:1), and give thanksgiving and praise to the One who is rich in mercy and does not wish for any to perish. May we be found among those who are redeeming the time and making known the sure mercies of God and the love of His beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

The final article in this series will be about Zion.



Site of the excavations at Old Jericho

The God of all Grace

Part 3: The God of all Comfort

David Pulman

“The God of all comfort” is “the God who comes alongside” – so this article tells us. Have we experienced God in this way? Can we learn from Him how to “come alongside” others? This article also originated as a Truth for Today radio talk.

Comfort is needed

Pressure and stress: who doesn't know about them? Every year thousands seek medical help for all sorts of stressful situations. Work exerts pressure due to tighter time-scales on projects, budget restrictions, rising costs, and increasing work load. Society exerts pressure on home and family to appear at least as good as the neighbours in terms of house, car, holidays and trendy clothes. Family responsibilities exert pressure, for example in connection with choice of the right school. A few years later comes the question of right job, college or university. The list just grows and the pressure increases but never goes away.

Add to these other unpredictable causes of stress such as illness, accident, death, divorce and a whole host of other family-related problems. Christians are not exempt from the stressful situations of life; like everyone else, there are difficulties to be faced and experienced. I am sure we all identify with affliction, pressure and stress.

We need “the God of all comfort” in this kind of life-situation. But have we made room for Him to come alongside and help?

The expression “The God of all comfort” is found as part of a description of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ in 2 Corinthians 1:3. The entire passage is well worth quoting.

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ. Now if we are afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effective for enduring the same sufferings which we also suffer. Or if we are comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation. And our hope for you is steadfast, because we know that as you are partakers of the sufferings, so also you will partake of the consolation.”

When Paul describes here the character of “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” he first calls Him, “the Father of mercies”. The thought of “Father” is of

One who is Source, Author or Originator of all the mercy that meets us in our needs. Although mercy is available to the whole of mankind, in the teaching of these verses it is especially available to the Christian from the heart of a loving Father who reaches out to Christians in the testing circumstances of life.

In Paul's next words this "Father of mercy" is "the God of all comfort." The English word "comfort" masks the depth of meaning contained in the original Greek. It bears the sense of "someone who is asked to come alongside." This meaning will guide our consideration of "comfort" in this article. It indicates a God who is willing and, yes, even desiring to bring comfort of the greatest magnitude; and yet waits to be invited. In this phrase we learn a great deal about the heart of God. He is a God who does not rush into our lives and will not give the impression of pushing into a situation until asked. There is a parallel to this, when we think of how God has made salvation freely available for mankind: though His heart of love goes out to all, we are given the opportunity to decide for ourselves. We know that to decide against salvation through faith alone in the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ will incur eternal loss, but this is the choice of the person who decides. Similarly with the "God of all comfort". A loving Father God, who cares beyond all measure, desires to comfort, but He waits to be asked. There are many situations, no doubt, when Christians have been so wrapped up in their problems that they have not thought about simply

asking the God of all comfort to come and help.

"Comfort" is needed

Verse 4 brings the situation to our attention in which the "God of comfort" works: "Who comforts us in all our tribulation". Tribulation means "pressure" and "affliction", two words that sum up the things that trouble us. God is the God for times of tribulation such as we described at the start of the article.

In major disasters, whether war, natural disaster, industrial accidents, family breakdown, the authorities now offer counselling to help people deal with the resultant psychological trauma. But very few ask the God who knows all about us to "come alongside" in such disasters. For the Christian, it is "the God of all comfort" whom we should first ask for assistance and support.

As often with the experiences given by a loving God, there is an additional lesson to be learned. In coming through our "tribulations" by the help of "the God of all comfort", Christians are challenged to pass on like help to others. Paul, who had known the help of "the God of all comfort" in his own "tribulations", now had to comfort the Christians at Corinth, not least because of the necessary effects of his own first letter to them. Already in that first letter he "came alongside them" in their problems. The first problem had been party factions and the associated "in-fighting", disgracing them all and tearing apart the outward evidence of the Spirit's unity (1 Corinthians 1). Paul could see the Corinthian believers, mainly of Greek origin, reverting to their own

wisdom instead of seeking help from God. So he had challenged them to seek the wisdom of the Spirit to deal with the disagreements (1 Corinthians 2). In 1 Corinthians 3 he had highlighted their carnal approach to Christian matters that made them infantile in their spiritual approach to problems. They were in danger that their Christian works would be found useless at the judgment seat of Christ.

The next major problem had been the sexual immorality of one of the Christians at Corinth, which the church was ignoring. Paul had stated that they were arrogant in disregarding this problem that was seriously damaging their Christian witness (see chapter 5). If it was allowed to continue, those who were less spiritual might think such behaviour acceptable, and so the sin would spread to others. It needed urgent and serious action by the elders. Paul had to write, “But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner – not even to eat with such a person” (1 Corinthians 5:11). In this verse, Paul extended the specific problem to a list of sinful practices which are both detrimental to the person concerned and damaging to the Christian fellowship as a whole.

Paul reflected the actions of “the God of all comfort”

The sadness and trouble resulting from such sin must have been immense in this company of believers! So Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians would be a very timely follow-up to the First which had

exposed their failures. In it Paul comforts “those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God” (2 Corinthians 1:4). And we need to see how *our* experiences can be of help to others in our fellowship. This is sound practical Christianity that we need to put into effect! Paul showed them how to be “Good Samaritans” and pour in oil and wine to bring about healing.

*Let us be helpers in a
world of hurt*

Let us be helpers in a world of hurt; but let us start in our own Christian company and not ignore “the home need”. If we belong to a company of Christians where unresolved issues cause pain to fellow believers, then we are not in a suitable state to help those who are in need of salvation. How can they possibly experience the healing of salvation in our fellowship?

Paul knew about suffering and consolation

In 2 Corinthians 1:5 Paul states, “For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ.” Though this verse may refer primarily to the apostles, it surely also applies to those with the same commitment to Christ. Many commentators limit the “sufferings” of the verse to those that Paul incurred in the ministry of the

Gospel in its widest sense. We know how much opposition, contempt, persecution and trial Paul and his companions suffered in the cause of Christ and His Gospel, the very things experienced by the Lord Jesus Himself during the whole of His public life. But Paul and his companions equally knew the consolation and comfort that they experienced from God and coming through the Lord Jesus Christ. These comforts sprang, no doubt, from a real sense of Christ's presence, His supporting grace and from His love "shed abroad" in their heart. They were more than sufficient to overcome all the trials that they were enduring.

But Paul's "sufferings" did not only arise from his Gospel ministry. In 2 Corinthians 11:28 we read of something beyond these. "[B]esides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches." Paul understood Christ's deep concern for His people and identified so well with

his risen Lord that the care of all the churches fell upon his shoulders. He remembered how the Lord Jesus had said to him on the Damascus road: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting ME?" (Acts 9:4). How well he felt their problems and laboured tirelessly for their recovery! This caring attitude of Paul is also seen in his letter to the Roman believers: "Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded towards one another, according to Christ Jesus" (Romans 15:5). Here Paul was concerned with those whom we might term "weak in the faith". Paul's instruction is to care for such by seeking "not to please ourselves". This means not allowing sin into the Christian company but, at the same time, understanding that some in it may not fully understand Christian teaching on certain issues. It is with love and care that we help fellow believers in these situations.

Paul wanted his difficulties to work for others

Paul's concern for the Corinthians' well-being gave him a positive outlook on his own situation that disregarded all his hardships and looked to his readers' gaining benefit from them. "Now if we are afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effective for enduring the same sufferings which we also suffer. Or if we are comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation." Paul's attitude would strengthen their affection for him, as it would show them the extent of his interest in their blessing.



Paul's hope for them was steadfast

Paul concluded his statement of concern for the Corinthians with words that show his deep conviction that, instead of failing under the pressure of their currently multitudinous problems, they would, by God's grace, come through triumphantly. "And our hope for you is steadfast; because we know that as you are partakers of the sufferings, so also you will partake of the consolation" (2 Corinthians 1:7). "Our hope is steadfast": he knew that there was a solid work of God in their souls and that God's new creation in them would not fail. Satan was throwing all kinds of difficulties at them, stirring up the flesh, but God would be victorious in the end. They would come through them, and once again be a shining light of united testimony in that idolatrous city of Corinth. Why did Paul have this strong conviction? "Because we know that as you are partakers of the sufferings, so also you will partake of the consolation." The moment *would* come in their tribulations when they would ask "the God of all comfort" to "come alongside" and help them through. And God *would*, in His kindness, make them again the vibrant Christian company that they had been when Paul and others first worked among them to their salvation. Verse 7 makes it probable that the Corinthian believers not only suffered from internal strife but also suffered persecution from their neighbours and friends of pre-conversion days.

In verse 11, we find Paul thanking them for their prayer-support while he was in difficulty elsewhere. We know of Paul's

prayer for them; but it was not just a one-sided care. He also greatly valued the Corinthian Christians' "prayer-care", as he did that of all saints. Paul was very aware of the need of prayer for the servants of God who were going through difficulty.

What lessons can we learn from our consideration of the "God of all comfort"?

Where there is pressure in the stressful situations of life, we need to stop being self-reliant. Whatever our trouble, we need to turn prayerfully to "the God of all comfort" who is waiting, and ask Him to "come alongside" and into our lives to provide the support that we need. The second half of this prayerful action, when we have unburdened our heart to our caring God, is to leave the burden there and accept His guiding hand to lead us through.

We are to remember that He will bring comfort into all our tribulations. There is not a difficulty which He is unable to handle. The size of the problem is not a restriction; nothing is too trivial and nothing is too great. As I am writing this, the radio has just brought to the attention of listeners the needs of a family of four children, all boys, who have a very rare cancer and need a bone marrow transplant. When the interviewer asked the father, "How do you get through each day?" the father's reply was, "As committed Christians we rely upon God; it's the only way". And they have a problem which is thought to be shared by only about one hundred people in the whole world!

And the further benefit that comes out of experiencing the comfort of a God who cares for us through difficult situations is that it enables us to be similar “care-workers”. There is an army of care-workers in the world today, paid and unpaid. 2 Corinthians 1:4 teaches that *we* need to be “care-workers” among suffering fellow believers. As we experience God’s care we are given an insight into how we can also supply the same kind of loving care to support others.

A caring attitude seeks the wellbeing of others and promotes healing, recovery and restoration. Non-Christians may not understand the deep hurt that a believer is going through, and so give the wrong kind of advice and support. How important, then, is the pastoral activity of caring among Christians! The Lord Jesus said in John 13:34-35, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” The kind of love shown by the Lord Jesus to His own disciples is the same standard of love and care that we should show to one another. Caring and being a comfort by “coming alongside” to help is a very real and practical means of showing “love for one

another”. “Coming alongside” is seeking to enter into the situation caringly and to help bear the burden. Lending support without being intrusive can be a very real and positive act of caring. It might be appropriate to be silent or to weep with those that weep (Romans 12:15), rather than talking and showing well-intentioned portions of Scripture, valuable though the word of God is.

Nevertheless: “For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope” (Romans 15:4). The Scriptures are the very words of God and are in themselves a source of comfort. As we read God’s word, it “comes alongside” into our hearts and minds, giving living support and often providing the answer to what is causing distress. Therefore, in this dual way of prayer and the reading of Scripture we have access to “the God of all comfort”.

“Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thessalonians 5:23). “Now the God of peace be with you all. Amen” (Romans 15:33).



We need to be “care-workers” among suffering fellow believers

The Sight of Heaven in the Letter to the Ephesians

Theo Balderston

When the sun has dipped below the horizon on summer evenings, I sometimes watch planes crossing the sky on their high-altitude paths to north America. All at once the small blue-grey speck will flash into brilliant white light, as it forms the exact angle between my eyes and the – to me now unseen – sun to reflect its rays directly on to me. As suddenly, its brightness subsides again into the blue-grey speck; but while it lasts it seems like a glimpse of heaven. It can serve as a (very defective) picture of how the unseen glory of Christ at the Father's right hand is mirrored to me in the Scriptures. They are, in Him, my sight of heaven.

I need that sight of heaven in Him. The Christian needs Christ in glory as his or her reference-point in this disorientating world. Over the past century or more there has been so much depressing and disorientating talk, even amongst Christians, against “heavenly-mindedness”, that its importance to Christianity now needs much re-emphasising. To do this has always been one of the main aims of *Scripture Truth*.

The letter to the Ephesians is a mirror of Christ in glory. Its starting-point is *blessing*: stating that because Christ is in heaven, all the Christian's blessings are also “in heavenly places” (1:3). This statement is framed in tacit but definite contrast to Moses' pronouncement of Israel's earthly blessings in Deuteronomy 28:1-13. The corollary of this for our behaviour on earth will be worked out later in the letter: but the first thing to establish is that our bearings are taken from the place where we are blessed – in Christ at the pinnacle of glory. The magnitude of such blessing is commensurate with God having paid so much to purchase us that He could pay no more – the blood of His Beloved (Ephesians 1:3-7).

Ephesians 1 proceeds to open up the breathtaking magnificence of God's purposes regarding Christ risen from the dead (Ephesians 1:8-10), and, more amazingly, to say that I partici-

*I need
that
sight of
heaven
in Him*

pate in these purposes (1:11-23). It tells me that God includes me in them – not because of any potential in me, someone *dead* in trespasses and sins – but just to make me eternally the object of “the exceeding riches of His grace in kindness... in Christ Jesus” (2:1-7). How amazing that God’s great objective should be to create for Himself an opportunity to display grace for an endless eternity! But He purposes that His grace be only and eternally displayed “in Christ Jesus” – that Christ should be the centre of it, and that for His sake alone, so to speak, grace should be shown. This unimaginable plan of grace reveals the wisdom of God to the unseen “principalities and powers” who are still – vainly – contesting Christ’s heavenly supremacy (2:11-3:12). This wisdom nullified their efforts to ruin God’s creation, and it is *all* that they can see. But God shows me more than He shows them. He desires me to understand in it all “the love of Christ which passes knowledge.” Small wonder that the first half of Ephesians starts and ends with a doxology (1:3; 3:18-21)!

However, all that said and realised, here I am, still bodily in this world. So then God, guiding Paul’s thoughts, tells me how I in turn should be mirroring that “light of heaven” in this mundane life of mine, just as the Scriptures mirror Christ glorified to me. Lordliness, arrogance, self-assertion: surely these qualities suit the heirs of so

stupendous a calling? Absolutely not: “lowliness, meekness, longsuffering and forbearing love” – the only right attitudes for those who realise that their share in Christ is *entirely of grace* (Ephesians 4:1-3; 5:21)! The same grace has showered gifts upon us from glory, to make us ready, as His Body, for that future day when we will publicly share all in Himself (4:4-16).

My earthly character is to be guided by how I have “learned Christ” in the first three chapters of the letter (Ephesians 4:20). What I learned was, that His present place defines my position now. Knowledge of “who I am,” in Christ glorified, entails my “walking” differently from the dark “walk” of this world in “the futility of its mind” (4:17). Just as I am “in Him” there, so also the “truth” that was evidenced in *His* life here is the moral guide for my life here (4:21). I have to have deliberately “put off” the lustful, dishonest, hurtful, angry, lying



Dusk over the sea of Galilee

uncleanness that is the dark heart of the “old man” (4:22-31; 5:3-5). And I have to have “put on” the holiness and the tender, forgiving, self-sacrificing love that met in Christ in the world and on the cross, and that meet in Him in glory (4:24, 5:2).

The world is dark, but in Him I am “light.” I am to have “no fellowship” with its unfruitful works. Very often this will entail not joining in the things in which the world gets its pleasure (Ephesians 5:3-12). 1 John 2:15-16 strips away the fair surface of the world and shows us its basic dynamics. The text doesn’t say that “all that is in the world is alright, if we just avoid its twin lusts and its pride.” The world is “shot through” with this character and attractive appearances can hide dark realities. On the other hand, we are not hermits, and there are many contacts that it would be wrong to avoid. We live in the world, but as lights, that by their brightness make its darkness seem darker; and hopefully make its denizens ashamed (Ephesians 5:3,4,12). Christianity involves non-conformity to the world (Romans 12:2), and that takes faith.

“Walking” by heavenly light doesn’t happen automatically; and we have to take practical steps, and to encourage each other, in it (Ephesians 5:15-20). The heavenly character, if seen at all, must be seen in the most intimate and testing relations of life – as wives, husbands, parents, servants (employees) and masters (bosses) (5:21-6:9).

The heavenly light also illuminates an earthly battlefield. (Christians not engaged in a battle need to ask about the reality of their Christianity.) We understand the confusing battle we find ourselves in by realising that it is the earthly co-ordinate of a heavenly battle. Satan still strangely believes he can contest the heavenly places with Christ, until that still-to-come day when he will be cast out of heaven on to earth for a short time (Revelation 12:7-12). Meanwhile the earthly side of the devil’s heavenly challenge is his effort to shake Christians out of the knowledge of their heavenly position, and as a result to disorientate their life here (Ephesians 6:12). Christ has won all; the victory is His, but Satan can disable us *in this world*. Beware! Don’t let him. The Christian has been equipped with a defensive weaponry more than equal to the devil. Its controlling item is faith; but we must take it up and use it (6:10-18).

Finally, if our calling is so great, then how great the gospel is! We should want a part in it – certainly a fervent prayer-part, but hopefully also a vocal part, as our “walking as lights” opens opportunities “to make known the mystery of the gospel” (Ephesians 6:18-20).

I was recently surprised to discover that some good Bible-study notes, designed for young converts from “unchurched” backgrounds, majored on Ephesians. Comparison of 4:17-5:33 with the present world suggests part of the authors’ reason. But their choice revealed something deeper: Ephesians is basic Christianity.

The Beggars, the Cheat and the Thief

Further thoughts on blessing in the place of the curse!

In Mark's Gospel the last person in this world whom our Lord stopped to heal was a blind beggar by a roadside (Mark 10:46-52). Matthew doubles it: he records that another beggar was there too (Matthew 20:29-34). In both Gospels the healing of Bartimaeus is represented as occurring on leaving Jericho; and therefore as the starting-point of the "triumphal entry" into Jerusalem. When we meet someone arriving at a station or airport whom we've never met before, they may say, "You'll recognise me because I'll be wearing this", or "I'll be carrying that." Our Lord identified Himself as Messiah by being the One who stopped for a blind beggar who had called Him, "Son of David", and healed Him. The lowest was brought into saving relation with the Highest: and in this the whole ministry of Christ to Israel was epitomised. Who previously had confessed Him "Son of David"? Some other blind men (Matthew 9:27), a dubious crowd (12:23), a foreign woman (15:22), and of course, Peter for the disciples (16:16). "Jesus stood still" when Bartimaeus called Him, "Son of David." Out of that public confession came the opportunity to perform again the miracle that above all others foreshadowed the kingdom (Isaiah 29:18; 35:5).

The result was, that when the Lord entered Jerusalem as Messiah (compare Zechariah 9:9), a pair of ex-blind beg-

gars were in His retinue (compare Matthew 20:34)! Did their uninhibited confession trigger the crowd's confession (Matthew 21:9)? They must have been a sort of "savour of death to death and life to life": their rags confirming the scepticism of unbelievers; but their story telling believers of the heart of God and proving that Jesus was everything that His entry on that donkey claimed Him to be.

Matthew, in his "Gospel of the King", adds the lovely touch that *in the temple* Christ gave a final Messianic witness. "The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them" (Matthew 21:14). It seems as if the "Son of David" quietly undid that regrettable outburst by "great David" centuries before (compare 2 Samuel 5:8). Once more the heart of God was seen.

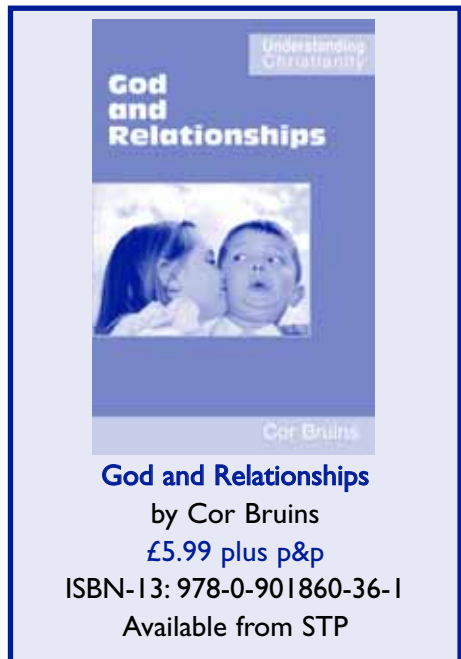
But Luke's "Gospel of grace" seems to say, "Yes, but there was a greater evidence of the heart of God at the close of the Lord's ministry than the healing of a blind beggar: namely, the salvation of a *rich* cheat." He adds the account of Zacchaeus to that of Bartimaeus (Luke 19:1-10). Everyone has some sympathy with a blind beggar, even an irritating one (18:39), but not with an affluent swindler. Yet, while Bartimaeus in faith initiated his contact with the Lord, the Lord initiated the contact with Zacchaeus. No doubt He had come from eternity into time, heavenly glory into

human poverty, specifically for Bartimaeus. But He publicly exhibits the eternal character of His appointment with Zacchaeus by stopping unbidden under that sycamore tree. It is conceivable that in v.8 Zacchaeus was defending his character by declaring his habitual uprightness. But it is more likely that there was no clearer and less excusable sinner in Jericho that day than Zacchaeus, so that the One who had come to call sinners to repentance could not but stop there. The Lord thereby answered faith at its feeblest level. Bartimaeus's faith had been strong. He needed saving but not seeking: he advertised himself. He had shouted, as if he knew that this was his last chance, "Jesus! Son of David!" He nailed his colours to the mast: no doubt or social displeasure was going to stop him making that confession and getting blessing. How lovely! But Zacchaeus's faith went no further than taking him up a tree. He needed seeking as well as saving. And the Lord brought him from this point to the point of calling Him, "Lord" (Luke 19:9). Why? Simply because Zacchaeus was lost, he needed saving, and "he also [was] a son of Abraham" (18:9-10). Again the heart of God was seen.

But Luke has more to tell. The *last* person for whom our Lord "stopped" in this world was not Zacchaeus but the thief on the cross. The Lord had come into the world to keep an appointment with him too. What an appointment! It had to wait till the right time and the right place. The Lord of glory went to the cross to meet that thief! Not until the cross do the Gospels record the Lord Jesus having to

do with an actual criminal. On the cross, where the LORD made the iniquities of us all to meet on Him (Isaiah 53:6), there was no distance between the perfect Saviour and the sinner. The Man on the middle cross won that criminal's heart. He repented and confessed his Saviour, saying, "Lord, remember me" (Luke 23:42). And whereas ex-blind beggars had the honour of joining the retinue of the Lord Jesus entering Jerusalem, He chose this thief as His follower into Paradise. Bartimaeus is named; Zacchaeus is named. But the thief was just a violent ruffian getting his deserts, whose name evidently the disciples never knew. However the Lord knew it: "I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; You are mine" (Isaiah 43:1).

And in this the whole heart of God and the loveliness of Christ are shown.



○ Let us with All Boldness Bow

○ let us with all boldness bow
Before God's throne of grace,
It was the precious blood of Christ
Earned us this priceless place.

It is this new and living way –
Leads to God's presence pure;
The door of flesh – our Lord Jesus,
Who makes our nearness sure.

'Tis there we pray and seek His face,
Turned from our wicked way;
Knowing that those called by His grace
Find pardon day by day.

○ blessed Lord, may our pleadings
Prove earnest in thine ears;
In righteousness may we approach
With fervency and tears.

Father, teach us to pray with prayer,
By Thy blest Spirit served,
That the gospel be boldly preached,
And all Thy saints preserved.

○ may our prayer be mindful too
Of Thy great care and power;
So we may seek abundant yields
Of blessing, hour by hour.

G. E. Stevens

[Tune: Belmont]