

Scripture Truth



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Elders, overseers, bishops

Martha's Spiritual Growth
The thorny issue of Predestination
Abraham: Failure and Fulfilment

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Corona virus

At the present time God judges the churches (Revelation 2 & 3), but not the world. When Agabus foretold an empire-wide famine in Acts 11:28, he didn't brand it a judgment. This is the gospel-day of God's incomparable grace towards all idolatrous mankind.

However the pandemic is a warning. It reminds us of what is always true, namely, that it is "Through the LORD's mercies [that] we are not consumed" (Lamentations 3:22). This world has deserved its Maker's judgment ever since Babel. The tragic victims of the virus are no worse sinners than the rest of us (Luke 3:2, 4). This pandemic is a reminder of the long compassions of an ignored God, and a warning that a day will come when people will say, "Peace and safety," but "sudden destruction" will come upon them (1 Thessalonians 5:3).

At time of writing the tidal wave of suffering, bereavement and fear still sweeps through the land. It exposes the usually hidden mass of grief and fear in a land where normally about 50,000 people die each month. It is striking that the only answer that the New Testament offers to bereavement is resurrection. So it was in the case of the widow of Nain's son (Luke 7: 11ff). Moved by knowledge both of the lady's loss of her only son and of her consequent destitution, the Lord touched the bier and addressed the corpse not as a thing but as a person. Death could not maintain its grip in His presence. When Jairus – presumably a well-heeled man – lost his only daughter (8:42), the same compassion moved the Lord.

But when He could not deliver, He wept. He wept over doomed Jerusalem (19:41). Resurrection is not at our command, but compassion, kindness, and a gentle gospel word are.

I ask You for a thoughtful love,
through constant watching wise,
to meet the glad with joyful smiles,
and wipe the weeping eyes,
a heart at leisure from itself
to soothe and sympathise.

Anna L. Waring (1823-1910)

Sometimes the best compassion is accompanied by few words (Job 2:13).

T. BALDERSTON

Two Storms

Theo Balderston

I. The Lord in the boat. Mark 4:35-41

Mostly in life our storms are our own storms, private to us and our families. In the Corona virus pandemic, unusually, we are all in the same storm. This might be a time to review two famous storms in the New Testament.

The first of these is the well-known storm on the lake, here studied from Mark 4:35-41. The disciples were with the Lord in the boat. Notice that they were with Him. He was not accompanying them in their journey. He had said to them, “Let us cross over to the other side.” There’s a great difference from wishing the Lord was in our boat, and being in the boat that He is in charge of. Ideally the disciples should have felt peace in the fact that they were with Him, going where He wished to go. They should have felt that if He could sleep, they were safe. Long before, David said to the frightened priest Abiathar, who was similarly having to flee from Saul, “Stay with me; do not fear. For... with me you shall be safe.” (1 Samuel 22:23, NKJV).

If we have placed our trust in the Lord Jesus for salvation, and if we are also with *Him* in the boat, desiring to go where He leads us, we can take this episode to ourselves. Nevertheless, we all know that even if that is so the storms of life can be very worrying. We all are (or should be) vividly aware of the failure of our own hearts. And so, when that violent storm struck, the disciples were terrified. As often said, it must have been a really furious storm for fishermen to be terrified. The boat was filling with water. It was a real test of faith. They could not understand the Lord’s apparent unconcern.

And at this time of writing all of us are in a very threatening storm. But some have much more reason to worry than others, whether reasons of health or other reasons such as financial. But if we are in the boat with *Him*, going on His journey, our worry should be tempered, even if it will not disappear. This storm searches us all as to where our true confidence and resource is. “The LORD is good; a stronghold in the day of trouble; He knows those who trust in Him” (Nahum 1:7).

The Lord was with them in the boat. He experienced the storm too. And we know that He has experienced our storm too. “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; you are Mine. When you pass through the deep waters, I will be with you...” (Isaiah 43:1-2). “We do not have a High Priest who cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities... Let us

therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, to obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.” (Hebrews 4:15-16).

And He who “has made the earth by His power... and established the world by His wisdom” (Jeremiah 10:12) had power over the storm. “Peace! be still!’ And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm” (Mark 5:39). We too can trust the power and wisdom of this One in our emergency.

There is a bit more to say about the disciples being in that boat with the Lord. We should note the purpose of that journey: to find two isolated, repulsive, demon-possessed men (see Matthew 8:28ff), cast out their demons, save at least one of them (Mark 4:19), and return again. Was it worth it? Of course it was. Would we like to stop the boat now and get out on to dry land? But what’s the destination, the Lord’s purpose in it all? Would we want to frustrate that?

And are we on the journey that He wishes to take us on? Are we obedient to His leading in our lives? The disciples were, or they would not have set out on the journey. Then their faith failed them. But then the Lord, whom they were with, intervened, and the wind and waves were still.

2. The Lord not in the boat. Matthew 14:22-33

The difference between this episode and the last is that the Lord was not in the boat. The cause, however, was not their disobedience. Rather, He had rather hastily sent the disciples off in a boat after feeding the five thousand, and had stayed behind to dismiss the crowds. The reason for this seems to have been that the mood of the crowd had turned rather ugly: they were intending to take Him by force and make Him a king. Their motives were entirely materialistic (John 6:15, 26, 27). The disciples had no doubt observed the mood of the crowd, and it would have made them uneasy.

So the disciples set off in the boat as the Lord directed, but without Him. They had to go against the wind, and the only way to do this in those days was evidently to row (Mark 6:48; Matthew 14:24). They rowed for hours, probably seven, and made scant headway, maybe only three out of the six miles across the lake at that point, so only reaching the middle of it. And where was the Lord? What was He doing? Why had He sent them off like this? So many questions must have puzzled, indeed unsettled, them. And we might feel like that too sometimes, especially in the current crisis.

Would we like to stop the boat now and get out on to dry land? But what’s the Lord’s purpose in it all?

*It was when the disciples' strength was exhausted
that He came towards them*

What *was* the Lord doing? Praying. After dismissed the crowds, He went up a mountain to pray (14:23). The feeding of the five thousand had been an amazing miracle with a rather unsettling end to it. Therefore the Lord no doubt went to commune with His Father concerning it. But that was not all. It says in Mark 6:48, “When He saw them straining at rowing.” The disciples might have felt deserted, but in fact He was watching their progress all the time. And what is the Lord doing now? “... He with His Father, always living to make intercession for us” (Hebrews 7:25).

Then, at the right time, He came to them. It says in Deuteronomy 32:36 concerning the LORD God’s dealing with Israel in time to come, “For the LORD will judge [that means, give judgment in favour of] His people, and have compassion on His servants, when He sees that their power is gone.” There’s something similar in this passage. It was when the disciples’ strength was exhausted, and they could no longer battle against the wind and waves, that He came towards them, walking on the water.

He came near enough to be visible to them. They thought He was a ghost, or apparition (Mark 6:49); and small wonder – so would we, if in the darkness and storm we saw someone walking on water. Mark 6:48 adds the important detail, “He... would have passed them by.” He looked as if He was ignoring them. They cried out in terror. Who was this person? It must have been eerie and very frightening for them.

But He wasn’t ignoring them. His immediate response was, “Be of good cheer. It is I. be not afraid!” (Matthew 14:27)

“It is I”. The voice told them that it was the Lord. And how often, when the Lord has given us a definite word about a situation, we have known that it was He, and our fears have been greatly eased. Whatever our troubles, however bad they are, this word should cheer us up: “It is I.” And however frightened our present circumstances may make us, let us hear the Lord’s word in the midst of it, “Be of good cheer! It is I. Be not afraid.” Note the order, He did not say, “Be not afraid: it is I.” It was the other way round. It was by realising that it was *the Lord* in the midst of that storm, that their fear could be subdued. Easy for me to write; hard to put into practice. But it is the clear lesson of this episode.

And then came Peter's astonishing reply, only recorded in Matthew's Gospel. "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water" (14:28). Some doubt lingered in Peter's mind despite hearing the well-known voice. It might seem to be the same Person, but He also seemed to be bypassing them.

Wonderful request, revealing a wonderful mindset in Peter. If the Lord wasn't coming into the boat (Peter didn't know at that point that He *would* come into it), Peter wanted to be where He was. He would be safer and better off with the Lord outside the boat, than inside the boat and the Lord not with Him. He wanted to be where the Lord was. Trace the life of Peter, and you will find that desire to be its motif throughout. The man who stayed with the Lord when many deserted Him (John 6:68), who (against the Lord's word) followed Him to Caiaphas's courtyard (Matthew 26:58), who was the first to enter the tomb (John 20:6), and the first off the boat in John 21 (v.7) wanted to be where the Lord was.

"Command me to come to You on the water!" That should always be our request. Not, "Remove the water and silence the wind, but, "Tell me to come to You through them!" So often we want the relief from trouble, but not the Person in the trouble. Again, easy to say, harder to do in the trouble.

And the Lord said, "Come!" And Peter went. We don't need to dwell on the rest – except to say that the Lord caught him (14:31). The important thing is that in this trouble Peter desired to be where the Lord was, and the Lord said, "Come."

Suppose, then, that we could have exemption from the threat of Corona virus, but the condition would be that the Lord would leave us; He would no longer hear our prayers. We would have no more fellowship with our ascended Lord and His God and Father. Heaven would be dead to our call. Would we want that? Would we be pleased? I don't think we would!

And notice that the end of this episode was worship. They "... came and worshipped Him, saying, "Truly You are the Son of God"" (14:33). Apart from John 1:49 (where it is not clear what Nathanael meant), this was the first time the disciples addressed Him as Son of God. They had learned Him better through their frightening ordeal.

*They had learned Him better
through their frightening ordeal*

Be thankful!

A word for today

David Anderson

A year ago the writer contributed a previous “word for today” on the subject of worry. It will repay a second reading in the light of the present pandemic. But this article is equally relevant – and uplifting!

“Be thankful. ...And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Colossians 3:15, 17 ESV)

I am writing this article at the start of Week 7 of the Covid-19 restrictions in Britain. Whilst both my previous ‘word for today’ article¹ and this one are always needful, this one is prophetic in the sense that it is very apposite to this present pandemic, in which life is so difficult for everyone. It explores reasons why believers can be thankful. I have personally been challenged by two direct commands:

- “Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thessalonians:18).
- “[Giving] thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Ephesians 5:20).

Oh, give thanks to the LORD!

Many times over in the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms, God’s people are called upon to be thankful to God. For example, Psalm 106:1, “Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever!”² This psalm recalls the multitude of the LORD’s mercies towards Israel throughout their history, and appeals to Him to “Save us, O LORD our God, and gather us from among the nations, that we may give thanks to your holy name and glory in your praise” (v.47). Verse 48 anticipates their millennial thanksgiving: “Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting! And let all the people say, “Amen!” Praise the LORD!” King David included vv.47-48 in his song of thanksgiving when he brought the ark into Jerusalem and appointed the Levites “to invoke, to thank and praise the LORD, the God of Israel” (see 1 Chronicles 16:4 with vv.35-36).

¹ “Don’t worry! A word for today,” *Scripture Truth*, 60 (July, 2019), pp.58ff.

² “Steadfast love” is also translated as: “mercy” or “loving-kindness.” See also 2 Chronicles 5:13; 7:3,6; 20:21; Ezra 3:11; Psalms 100:5; 107:1; 118:1-4,29; 136:1-26; Jeremiah 33:11.

Whilst thanks for the LORD's provisions for and preservation of them was the only proper response to Him from Israel, to do similarly is also beneficial to His people in any day or dispensation. "It is good to give thanks to the LORD, to sing praises to your name, O Most High" (Psalm 92:1). Psalm 92 was written as "A Song for the Sabbath" (see title), so that week by week Israelites could reflect on God's goodness and praise His Name. In this respect it is noteworthy that the Hebrew word for "give thanks" is sometimes translated "praise." For example, "Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy, and I will praise you with the lyre, O God, my God. Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God" (Psalm 43:4-5). Therefore, thanksgiving is an important part of praising God.

Many reasons to be thankful

The psalms present many reasons, in addition to the two stated in Psalm 106:1, why Israel could give thanks and praise the LORD with their whole heart (Psalm 111:1). Namely, because:

- He was their personal God (Psalms 30:12; 71:22; 86:12; 118:28).
- they belonged to Him (Psalm 79:13).
- He was their salvation (Psalm 118:21).
- He was their hope, help, and health; and exceeding joy (Psalms 42:5,11; 43:4).
- He was their strength and shield (Psalm 28:7).
- - of His holiness, or His holy Name (Psalms 7:17; 30:4; 97:12; 99:3).
- - of His righteousness (Psalms 7:17; 119:7, 62).
- - of all His wonderful deeds (Psalms 9:1; 75:1).
- - of His benefits, especially towards the children of men (Psalms 107:8, 15, 21, 31).
- dead people cannot praise Him (Psalms 6:5; 30:9; 88:10).

Be thankful to the Father

Christians believers also thank God for these same reasons. They, too, appreciate the Father's nature, character, and attributes. But their relationship with Him contrasts with Israel's covenantal (and earthly) relationship with Jehovah. Christians have an intimate relationship with God – He is their Father (see John 20:17). And the Lord said that God, as our heavenly Father, will take care of us, for He knows our needs, and He will provide (see Matthew 6:25-34).

*A sinner's conversion causes rejoicing in heaven.
Conversions also cause believers
to give thanks to God.*

The Lord Jesus said that a sinner's conversion causes rejoicing in heaven (Luke 15:7, 10, 32). Conversions also cause believers to give thanks to God. Paul and Timothy thanked Him when they heard that the Colossians had been saved; and that Epaphras had established a church in Colosse. "We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus..." (Colossians 1:3-4). Verses 9-13 detail the things that they prayed for in relation to this church, which they had not visited. The prayer climaxes in vv.12-14:

"Giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."

Such thanksgiving is proper Christian praise and worship. Its specifics are that

- the Father has made us suitable to partake in a heavenly inheritance. By His grace, He has predestined us for the blessing of being with, and like His Son. Such is His predetermined will, and He is working everything to accomplish it (see Ephesians 1:5-6, 10-11 & Romans 8:28-30).
- He has rescued us from Satan's authority and placed us under His Son's authority – His only Son, whom He loves, and whose rule over us is permeated by divine love.
- He has redeemed us and forgiven our sins through His Beloved, in whom we have redemption through His blood (see Romans 3:24 & Ephesians 1:6-7).

Following 1:12-14, Paul's Letter to the Colossians details many other blessings we have in Christ. 2:9-10 summarize these: "For in him dwells all the fulness of the Godhead bodily; and ye are complete in him, who is the head of all principality and authority" [Darby Tr.]. Out of the many practical exhortations Paul gives in the latter part of his letter (i.e., 2:16 - 4:18), two concern the giving of thanks: "[B]e thankful...And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (3:15, 17, ESV).

Believers can also give thanks to “the Father” because He is the “God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 1:3); and because “according to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you” (1 Peter 1:3-4). The Father desires this true worship from us – that worship of Him that is both “in spirit and in truth” (see John 4:23-24).

The correct attitude: be thankful

Christians live in the difficult last days of this present age (2 Timothy 3:1). In the succeeding verses Paul warned Timothy that such times would be marked by an attitude of ingratitude on the part of sinful mankind. The general selfishness of men especially manifests itself in their grumbles and complaints when adversity invades their materialistic, pleasure-seeking lifestyles. It is in situations such as the present pandemic that believers can show an entirely different spirit, the spirit of thankfulness to God for all His benefits and provisions. We must remember that He is “kind to the ungrateful and the evil” (Luke 6:35). It is so easy to spoil our testimony by adopting the cynical thinking of the world!

A positive Christian lifestyle

In Colossians 3:17 Paul encourages believers to live lives in which everything they say or do is governed by the Lordship of Christ. “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.” That enables believers to thank God the Father, through the Lord Jesus, for the opportunity of demonstrating the life-changing power of the gospel each day of their lives!

There is no circumstance in a believer’s life where a grateful attitude is inappropriate. We are exhorted to:

- “Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thessalonians 5:18). We should do this whether these circumstances are congenial or adverse for us; and whether or not we understand God’s plan for us in passing us through them.

*Give thanks in all circumstances;
for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you*

He gave thanks for what seemed to the disciples to be an insufficient provision

- Give “thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Ephesians 5:20). Again, “everything” means the difficulties of life as well as the good things, for both are allowed by God for our ultimate good (see Romans 8:28).

Within this general need for thankfulness, you should in particular:

Be thankful for who you are. There is no such thing as “identity-crisis” for those who trust in God! Recently I read a paraphrase of Psalm 139:14, which read, “I thank you that You have made me to be who I am!” Put together with verses 1 & 13-18 of the same psalm, I can say that God foreknew me, and made me to be the person I am for His own pleasure and will. Paul recognized this when wrote to Timothy that he was grateful that God had appointed to his apostleship because He knew Paul would be faithful. But He gave him the strength to fulfil his responsibilities (see 1 Timothy 1:11-15, especially verse 12).

Be thankful for what you have. Each of the Gospel-writers records that the Lord gave thanks for the provision of five loaves and two fishes for the feeding of the five thousand. “Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated. So also the fish, as much as they wanted” (John 6:11). The other Gospels state that He blessed [spoke well of] the food, meaning He gave thanks for what seemed to the disciples to be an insufficient provision. Paul taught that believers should always give thanks for food and acknowledge the Creator’s providential care (see 1 Timothy 4:3-6). In this respect I always am conscious that giving thanks for food shows that I am also grateful for all God’s other provisions for life – a wife and family, a home, clothing, a job, health and strength, daily grace, etc. But we must heed Paul’s admonition, “But if we [only] have food and clothing, with these we will be content” (6:6-8).

Be thankful for fellow believers. Paul always gave thanks for the work of God evident in other believers, and that God had enriched them with all things (2 Corinthians 9:11-12). For example: ³

³ See Romans 1:8, 6:17, 16:4; 1 Corinthians 1:4; 2 Corinthians 8:16; Ephesians 1:16; Philippians 1:3; Colossians 1:3; 1 Thessalonians 1:2, 2:13; 2 Thessalonians 1:3, 2 Timothy 1:3-5; Philemon 1:4.

“We...give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Thessalonians 2:13-14).

Be thankful in assembly. Paul instructed Timothy that it is our responsibility in assembly prayer meetings to give thanks on behalf of all classes of unbelievers with the objective that they might be saved (see 1 Timothy 2, especially v.1).

In 1 Corinthians 14:16-17, he expands the practice of thanksgiving to include other assembly meetings. But the Lord’s Supper must include that essential activity of giving thanks for the bread and the wine.

“The Lord Jesus...took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, ‘This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way [i.e., after He had given thanks – DA] also he took the cup, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me’” (1 Corinthians 11:23-25).

Challenges

We live in a world which has turned away from God. He is not honoured by them nor are they thankful for all His providential care of them (see Romans 1:21). Let us be different and remember always to give Him thanks:

- for who He is.
- for what He has done and is doing.
- that Christ is the Victor (1 Corinthians 15:57).
- for saving us.
- for every blessing we receive from Him.
- for answered prayer.
- for Christian liberty (Romans 14:6).
- both in, and for, all things.
- in everything we do or say.

And even during this pandemic for we should “not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” (Philippians 4:6).

It is our responsibility in assembly prayer meetings to give thanks on behalf of all classes of unbelievers

Elders, overseers, bishops

I. What they are and how they are appointed

Frank Wallace

This excellent article by a now deceased servant of the Word first appeared in Scripture Truth 48 (March, 1983), pp. 17-20. The second part will follow, God willing. These are articles that should be reprinted – and read – every so often.

Teaching about humility was an important part of the Lord's earthly ministry. Nowhere was it more prominent than in His last words to his disciples before He suffered. In the midst of those who were contending about who was to be the greatest He was "as he that serveth" (Luke 22:27). In the full consciousness of His glory as coming from God and going to God He "laid aside his garments; and took a towel, and girded himself... and began to wash the disciples' feet" (John 13:1-5). These were the men who were going to represent Him on earth after His return to glory. The care of the people of God would be in their hands. Great authority – apostolic authority – would rest on their shoulders. But the Lord well knew the frailty of the human heart. He knew the corruption of fallen nature and the tendency of man always to exalt himself at the expense of others. Who could teach them humility better than Himself? Had they not observed what power to attract lay in the glorious humility of Christ? How that the children flocked to Him – the adulteress, the needy, the helpless, all finding in Him a ready answer of blessing, kindness, forgiveness and cheer? And would not these be the things that came into their minds as He told them the significance of the footwashing? "If I, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye ought to wash one another's feet."

We readily criticise the disciples' attitude, but if we look in our own hearts we see the seeds of the same hateful attitude there – the desire to be pre-eminent. But Scripture is plain: "One is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren" . . . "That in all things he might have the pre-eminence" (Matthew 23:8; Colossians 1:18).

Part, at least, of the responsibilities laid upon the apostles devolves upon us. Only part, for the office of apostle itself and the particular authority of apostleship have long disappeared. However the responsibility for the *care* of the people of God remains – that part of the responsibility denoted by the three words "elders", "overseers", "bishops". I wish to examine the teaching of Scripture about this type of service. But before questions about the form it

takes and its practicalities comes the matter of the spirit of it, and the attitude in which it is done. Without humility nothing else matters. And the example that was placed before the apostles is there for us too.

Persons bearing the title “bishop”, “elder” (not to mention “minister” and “deacon” – words which space will preclude our going into) are all around us, and anyone would be pardoned for asking those associated with this magazine, “Why haven’t you bishops? Haven’t you elders?” Over the centuries these words have gathered anything but humble associations; our business however is not with what other people have, or haven’t got. What we have or haven’t got is not our standard. Our standard must be, “What does the Bible say about these forms of service? What does it say about bishops, overseers or elders?”

Elder and overseer the same person

The first thing that Scripture makes clear is that these words speak of forms of service rendered by one and the same person – not by different persons taking different positions in a hierarchy. Where does Scripture show this?

In Acts 20:17 we read of Paul calling to him “the *elders* of the church” in Ephesus. Further down in the same chapter Paul says to these same “elders”, “Take heed ... to all the flock, over which the Holy Ghost hath made you *overseers*” (v. 28).

Now in Philippians 1:1 we find “bishops” among those addressed. But the word in the original for “bishop” is exactly that used in Acts 20:28 for “overseer”. “Bishop” and “overseer” are therefore exactly the same thing.

In Titus 1:5 Paul instructs Titus to “ordain elders”. But among the personal qualifications for this service that Titus is to bear in mind we find that “a *bishop* must be blameless” (v. 7).

Lastly, what does Peter say? He too urges the *elders* to take the *oversight* of the flock of God (1 Peter 5:1-2). Scripture is unanimous in its testimony that eldership and oversight are united in the same person, and overseers and bishops are identical.

*Our business is not with what other people have,
or haven't got.
Our standard must be, "What does the Bible say
about bishops, overseers or elders?"*

*“Elder” describes the characteristics
of the person who does the work;
“oversight” describes the work he does.
An overseer “looks over” the people of God
to find out what they need.*

We might note further that Scripture does not imply that solitary elders were ever found in any New Testament assembly. We always read of them in the plural. The indications in Scripture are that many of the early companies of believers were quite small ones. Think of, say, six elders in an assembly of one hundred people. Six bishops per one hundred people! This is the kind of relation Scripture presents. Not one *above* many, but always working together, helping forward the things of the Lord.

What elders and overseers do

What do these words mean? The term “elder” occurs frequently in the Old Testament to describe those who had authority among the people of God (e.g. Exodus 19:7; Numbers 11:16, 24-25); men whose maturity gave them discernment to guide and help the people of God to obey His will, not arbitrarily, but as themselves subject to the Law of God; men who could also impose discipline upon those who disobeyed (e.g. Deuteronomy 25:7-10; cp. Ruth 4:2ff). The successors of these Old Testament elders had by New Testament times degenerated into the opponents of the Son of God (e.g. Matthew 16:21, 26:57). But there was a need for the same form of service among those who received Christ, and who took their place with Him outside the nation – a service connected with “authority”, “direction”, “leadership”.

“Elder” describes the characteristics of the person who does the work; “oversight” describes the work he does.

In itself the word for elder is connected – obviously – with age. Sometimes this is all that it implies (e.g. 1 Peter 5:5). But among the people of God it indicates *maturity*. Paul says distinctly, “Not a novice” (1 Timothy 3:6). An elder is *not just* one of advanced age, but one whose experience in the things of God has fitted him to handle them aright and for the benefit of the people of God.

“Oversight” explains itself. An overseer “looks over” the people of God to find out what they need. The shepherd who goes to the field to “look over” his sheep is not calculating how he might impress them. He is anxiously running his eye over them to find out what they need – some sheep might be injured, or not

there; there may be a new lamb; danger may have developed nearby. Moreover, if the shepherd does not know what he is doing, his flock may suffer serious damage.

Just so, an “overseer” in the assembly has the care of the flock at heart, and its needs. And he has to know what he is about in a spiritual sense, if he really is to care for them.

Over the years there has been much declension among the people of God. Much of it would have been avoided, had there been brethren of mature spiritual calibre who had the wellbeing of the flock of God at heart – men who had had the spiritual influence and stature necessary to deal with the problems that arose. What a crying need there is amongst the various companies of the saints for this type of mature, godly, exercised person, who really cares for the flock of God! The door is wide open for individuals to take up this service.

How they are selected

How did brethren in the early church find themselves charged with this form of service? Scripture indicates three elements in their selection.

Firstly, apostolic appointment. In Acts 14:23 Paul and Barnabas “ordained elders in every city”. Elsewhere we find Paul, on a specific occasion, instructing Titus, on his behalf so to speak, to do the same (Titus 1:5).

Secondly, appointment by the Holy Spirit. It was the *Holy Ghost* who had made the elders in Ephesus “overseers, to feed the church of God” (Acts 20:28).

Thirdly, personal exercise. 1 Timothy 3:1 speaks of the *desire*, or *aspiration* of the individual himself.

How do these three elements in the “selection” of elders and overseers apply to our day? The apostles are long dead and we live at the end of the days of the church of God on earth. Does their authority survive? Is there any central body of believers today to whom we can turn for the selecting and empowering of elders? In spite of great claims to the contrary we find nothing in Scripture to suggest that such a “succession” of apostolic authority was ever even contemplated. The apostles’ *doctrine* we have, and a “succession” in the

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custodianship of it (2 Timothy 2:2); the apostles' *fellowship* we still have, for this involves the Lord's ministry. But the office and authority, as such, of the apostles have gone, and gone for ever. Is it not presumption for any individual or group of believers to arrogate to himself or to itself the right to do this "ordaining" which at the start was confined to the apostles? Where does Scripture sanction "election" or "voting" as a substitute? How could such presumption be justified before God?

The other elements however remain. The Holy Spirit abides with us forever. Personal exercise will be necessary as long as we are left on earth. The Spirit's choice and the person's exercise will co-ordinate to produce a moral condition and power that will carry an influence to be recognised by the assembly. Their authority will be *moral* and *spiritual*, not *official*.

Maybe, many of us who are older have wasted our time to such an extent that there is no longer opportunity for us to attain to the spiritual maturity required for this form of service. Let us examine our hearts. But let the word reach the young. If the Lord does not come, the maintenance of the testimony to the great truths of Christianity rests on their shoulders. Don't let them be given up! Don't let us abandon things that were procured, and also recovered, for us at great cost! For this it requires that *young* believers be concerned to be men and women of spiritual maturity, *exercised* (an old-fashioned, but a powerful word) to apply themselves diligently to the things of the Lord, not merely to accumulate head knowledge, but to practise the truth in their lives. This is a crying necessity. In time to come, if the Lord tarry, fresh young people will come to the meetings. If the young of the present generation don't know the truth, they will be of no use to anyone. If they don't practise the truth, they can be of no spiritual influence for good. On the shoulders of our young brothers and sisters rests a very heavy burden. The sooner they apply themselves to equipping themselves to bear it, the better. *Personal exercise for this service of which we speak is all-important at this present time.* Leave it to the Holy Spirit to place you where your service and influence will be of most use. He knows.

Part 2 to follow.

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rests a very heavy burden.
The sooner they apply themselves
to equipping themselves to bear it, the better.*

The thorny issue of Predestination

Part 2: The other side of the coin

Ken Wood

This excellent article is the second of two. Both originated as one “Truth for Today” talk, broadcast on Premier Radio and other stations. The first article appeared in the last (April) issue of Scripture Truth. This article looks at “the other side of the coin”: “God so loved the world...” It is well worth reading.

In my previous article on this subject, I looked at the Scriptural truths of election and predestination. God indeed “chose us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world that we should be holy and blameless before Him” (Ephesians 1:4, ESV). But we now have to recognise that, taking into account the entirety of biblical testimony, the Bible presents two different ways of looking at the whole question of how someone is brought to faith.

On the one hand, it is all God’s doing. He has chosen, before the foundation of the world, those who will believe the gospel and receive Christ as their Saviour. This is the side that we studied from Romans 9 in the previous article. On the other hand, in 1 Timothy 2:3-4, the same Paul as wrote Romans 9 tells us that God “desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”

Every man, woman and child in the world is the object of God’s indiscriminate love, and He longs for every one of them to be saved. He sent His Son to be the Saviour of the whole world (see 1 John 4:14), and no one is excluded from God’s offer of salvation. And so, in 2 Peter 3:9, God answers those who mock at the promise of Christ’s return, a return which will bring to an end the present day of grace and the period in which everyone has the opportunity to respond to the gospel. To those who say, in effect, “Christ’s return will never happen”, Peter explains that the reason for the delay is that God is still patiently waiting “*not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance*” (2 Peter 3:9).

The Lord Jesus Himself says in Matthew 11:28, “Come to Me, *all* who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” – and He means it! It is only refusal to believe and close with His offer that prevents anyone from receiving eternal blessing.

Both of these things – God’s election of those who believe, and God’s desire that all should be saved – are

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taught with equal clarity and equal authority in the Scriptures. Yet our minds cannot see how they can both be true. I know some theologians believe they have the key to this conundrum, but I cannot follow their arguments, and I suspect most readers will agree with me that we just cannot see how these two truths fit together.

An illustration

I'm now going to suggest an illustration of statements not fitting together, but both being true. I expect it may make the size of my readership collapse as dramatically as the size of Gideon's army when he sent 31,700 of his 32,000 troop home! (see Judges 7:1-8) I'm going to give you an illustration from the subject I studied at university – rather a long time ago – that is, physics. Not only that, but I'm going to talk about a branch of physics which has a particular aura of incomprehensibility, namely, what is called quantum theory or quantum mechanics.

Well, for those still reading this article, here goes.

It's no exaggeration to say that in the early twentieth century, physics went through a lengthy period of turmoil, because facts came to light which were not only baffling, but seemingly contradictory.

And talking of things coming to light, it's light that I'm going to make my example! (Some readers may be aware that what I'm going to say doesn't just apply to light. But, for our purposes here, we'll stick with light.) If you'd rather not find out about light, just skip on to the next section.

You can prove by doing experiments that light is made up of tiny waves. It behaves just like ripples on the surface of a pond. If you were to get a wooden board, cut two parallel slits in it, stand it in a pool of water with the slits vertical, and then make ripples on one side of the board, you would see on the other side of the board, where the two sets of ripples came through the slits and met each other, a kind of criss-cross pattern in the water. At some points on the surface the ripples coming from the two slits would add together to make a bigger ripple, whilst at other points they would cancel out.

The same thing happens with light. If you shine light through two parallel slits in some opaque material and place a screen on the other side, you see a pattern of dark and bright lines on the screen. The bright lines are where the two sets of waves are reinforcing each other and the dark lines are where they are cancelling each other out.

All of this was well known before the twentieth century. But then people discovered that light was in fact “quantised”, which means that it always travels

around packaged into tiny discrete “lumps”. We call these lumps “photons,” and they are not at all like waves but more like little billiard balls.

How can light be like little balls and like waves at the same time? Well, sticking to the example of the lines on the screen, the obvious answer is that there are a lot of photons landing on the screen where the bright lines are and none where the dark ones are. In fact we can use a detector device to count individual photons as they arrive, and sure enough, we find that the brighter the light, the more photons we’ll count if we put our detector at that spot.

But how come each of these individual photons knows where it has to land on the screen so that all of the photons acting collectively form the pattern they would make if they were waves? How does each photon know what all the others are doing?

And here’s the totally weird thing. If you turn the brightness of the lamp right down to almost nothing, so that it is only emitting, if you like, one photon at a time, you still see the pattern of lines! If you catch each individual photon where it lands on the screen and count them all up over time, you’ll find that the pattern is still there. Somehow or other each individual photon knows that it’s supposed to be part of a series of waves and it behaves like that, or, should I say, collectively, over time all the photons behave as though they were a series of waves, even though there is only one of them “in flight” at any given time.

Now I’m not sure whether I’ve succeeded in getting across to you just how baffling this problem is, but believe me, it really is a deep and imponderable mystery. It perplexed the world’s greatest physicists when it was discovered, and it still does. One of the early pioneers in this field, the Danish physicist Niels Bohr, said “Anyone who is not shocked by quantum theory has not understood it.” Another famous physicist, the American Richard Feynman, said, “I think I can safely say that nobody understands quantum mechanics.”

Here then is something in the physical world which, it seems, we are simply incapable of understanding. There are two ways of looking at how the universe works, and they are both true. Yet our minds cannot fit them together.

Why, then, should it surprise us if we find the same situation in the realm of spiritual truth? The Bible describes something in two different ways, and they are both true, yet our minds cannot put them together.



How the Bible deals with the two truths

And now we come to the eye-opener, the realisation which, at least for me, makes the problem evaporate.

Why is it that the Bible writers such as Paul can write perfectly happily expressing both of these truths, without so much as a hint of a suggestion that they see any difficulty? It is for the very good reason that, if we simply take the Bible at face value, not questioning either of these truths, and “get on with the job” of living the Christian life, we find that our inability to see how they can be reconciled causes us no practical difficulty whatsoever!

We preach the gospel to everyone, telling them with biblical authority that God loves them and has given His Son to die for them, *and* that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Romans 10:13). We believe, not only that anyone can be saved, but also that God *desires everyone* to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4). Yet at the same time we pray that God will make the preaching effective and save souls. Why do we do that? Because we believe it is all God’s work. We believe it is all up to Him.

And when someone accepts Christ we thank God that He is adding to the church daily those who *should* be saved” (see Acts 2:47), don’t we? Of course we do. It is the most natural thing in the world to – as it were – switch between the two ways of looking at things without any practical difficulty.

And what of our own experience of conversion? Everyone’s spiritual history is unique, of course, so this may not fit your case; but what I think most of us would say is that we came to the point at which we made a decision. To the best of our knowledge we were free agents, and we chose to bow the knee to Christ and accept Him as Lord and Saviour. But I suspect that for most of us, immediately after taking that step it was the most natural thing in the world for our hearts to well up in thanksgiving to God, because we just knew instinctively that this was not our doing but His.

It is sometimes pictured like this. You are standing outside a great walled city, the city of salvation. There is a doorway in the wall and the door is open. Inscribed above it are the words of universal invitation taken from the final gospel-appeal in the Bible, in Revelation 22:17. “LET THE ONE WHO IS THIRSTY COME; LET THE ONE WHO DESIRES TAKE THE WATER OF LIFE WITHOUT PRICE.” As you stand before that open door, you make a decision, “I’m going to go in.” You go through the door by accepting Christ into your heart. Finding yourself on the inside, you turn round to look at the doorway through which you have come. And there, inscribed above the door on the inside are the words of Ephesians 1:4 which I cited at the beginning of the first article in this series, “CHOSEN IN HIM BEFORE THE FOUNDATION OF THE WORLD.”

Martha

Alpha People

George Stevens

The previous article in this fine series, on Lydia, appeared in the April, 2016 issue.

“But Martha was cumbered about much serving, and came to him, and said, Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? bid her therefore that she help me. And Jesus answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things...” (Luke 10:40-41, KJV).

The name Martha derives from an Aramaic word meaning “lady”,¹ and yet, as a believer in Christ, we find her taking the place of a servant.

Martha was burdened

In the verses from Luke cited above we find Martha distracted by “much serving”. Notice that little word “much”. It makes all the difference because she was attending to the bodily needs of her guest, the Lord Jesus Christ. There was Jesus speaking to the household, and poor Martha, in her willingness to care for Him, becomes so burdened with the rigours of hospitality that she misses His teaching. As a result, she accuses her own sister of laziness, having left her to serve alone. I wonder how many of us are so taken up with the many aspects of the Lord’s service, that we do not spend time in His presence listening to Him? Practically, we do this in prayer and Bible study. Jesus admonished her and revealed that time spent with Him is a good occupation indeed, even though her laborious service was good in itself.

Time spent with Jesus is a good occupation indeed.

Martha learned

Martha shines in John chapter 11 where we find Jesus has returned to the outskirts of the village following the death of Lazarus. Martha heard that He was coming and, taking on the role of hostess, went out to meet Him. She said to Him, “Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died” (v.21). She knew that Jesus had the power to heal the sick. Jesus takes this thought up and speaks about resurrection (the raising up of a body from the dead and re-

¹ See J.D. Douglas (ed.), *The New Bible Dictionary* (London, IVP, 1962), p.791. [Ed.]

*Then there was Martha. She was pleased
to serve in a right way. The lady serves!*

uniting it with soul and spirit). Martha believed that her brother, Lazarus, would be raised in the last day.

Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Believest thou this?” (vv.25-6). Martha told Him that she believed He was the Christ, the Son of God, and then she went to tell Mary. They all went to the tomb where Jesus proved Himself to be the Son of God by calling Lazarus back to life.

Martha served

In John 12, we find a balanced scene in the house of Martha (v.2). Jesus is again present with Lazarus, Mary and Martha, and others. Lazarus, whose name means “without help” (according to *Young’s Concordance*), was sitting at the table with the all-powerful Lord. This pictures “communion”. Mary, whose name means “bitter”, takes an alabaster box of expensive ointment with which she anoints Jesus. How sweetly she worshipped! So much so, that the fragrance of her offering filled the whole house. Then there was Martha. She was pleased to serve in a right way. The lady serves! There is no hint of jealousy or discontent. She is not burdened with too much service.

The whole scene depicts the main elements of a balanced Christian life:

- 1 Communion,
- 2 Worship, and
- 3 Service.

Martha’s Qualities

Martha is often despised because of the Lord’s rebuke to her, but we have seen that she had special qualities. She recognised that He was the Messiah, the Son of God. She was not afraid to publicly identify herself with Him. She desired to serve her Him. She was hospitable. And, in the end, she also listened to and learned from His teaching and His power.

Martha had special qualities

Martha's Spiritual Growth

Grant W. Steidl

“There therefore they made him a supper, and Martha served” (John 12:2, Darby Tr.)

Martha usually looks a bit tarnished when compared with her sister Mary. She only served (and that in a complaining way) while Mary sat at Jesus' feet.

But let's take a second look. Three biblical accounts portray her as a growing servant – one that seemed to learn from her mistakes and so make good progress.

Martha had a problem. Her sister irritated her.

Martha the Belligerent [Luke 10:38-42]: Although Martha received the Lord into her house and served him, she had a problem. Her sister irritated her. Mary wasn't doing what Martha thought she should be doing. (Doesn't that sound familiar?) And so, service had become a burden to Martha, and this resulted in a critical spirit and resentment. Even toward the Lord. Now, service was never intended to be a burden, but rather the outflow of a happy heart.

Martha the Believer [John 11:3-5; 20-27]: Martha grew through suffering. In her distress over her brother's sickness and death she appealed to the Lord. Almost complainingly she says to Him, “Lord, if Thou hadst been here, my brother had not died.” As the conversation continued, she seemed to be able to trust Him for the future, but not for the present. That's so like us, isn't it? It's easier to trust Him for eternal salvation than present difficulties. But Martha is moving in the right direction. She gives a ringing testimony of her faith in Christ.

*Martha seemed to be able to trust the Lord
for the future, but not for the present.*

Martha the Beautiful [John 12:1-3]: Another supper here – so different from the first one. Now everyone has found the right *niche*: Martha serves, Lazarus sits at the table, and Mary anoints Jesus' feet with ointment. Best of all, no-one is complaining. Martha has become beautiful. From her lovely example, we can learn the joy of simply filling our place of service to the Lord, and allowing others to fill theirs.

From The Lord is Near (Believers Bookshelf Canada), 2020

O Lord, draw near!

“Jesus Himself drew near”
to two who trod that road
in utter, unrelieved despair;
and then their error showed.
O Lord, draw near! O Lord, draw near!

“Jesus Himself drew near:”
and all that spoke of Him
in all the Scriptures showed He clear,
and set their hearts aflame!
O Lord, draw near! O Lord, draw near!

“Jesus Himself drew near;”
and, as He broke the bread,
they knew Him, and it cast out fear;
faith made them bold instead.
O Lord, draw near! O Lord, draw near!

Your promise, Lord, we hear:
to those who keep Your word
Father and Son do *now* draw near
and make such Their abode.
O Lord, draw near! O Lord, draw near!

“Jesus Himself drew near;”
but soon He must be gone:
He must ascend in glory fair
to make His home their own.
O Lord, appear! O Lord, appear!

After Ada R. Habershon (1861-1918): see hymnary.org.

Abraham: Failure and Fulfilment

Genesis 20-21

F.B Hole

Continuing a series commenced in July 2017.

The failures of God's saints are not hidden from us in the Scriptures, as we have just seen in very pronounced fashion in the case of Lot. In Genesis 20 we get a glimpse of Abraham on a very much lower level than he had been in chapter 18. He moved to Gerar (v.1), and, before Abimelech the king, he resorted to the same device as he had employed years previously in Egypt. This time the situation was even more serious, for Sarah was just about to bear the child of promise (see 18:14). Abraham's defection might have compromised what God had promised and was about to perform. Hence God took what we may call drastic action to protect Sarah, not dealing with Abraham who had failed, but directly with the heathen king (20:3-7).

Consequently Abimelech faced Abraham with his deception. Abraham confessed that fear for his own safety, in a place not marked by the fear of God, had led him into it (vv. 9-13). In result, however, the fear of God was more marked in Abimelech than in Abraham. It was a definite rebuke to Abraham that God, who so frequently had appeared to him, should now pass him by and deal with the king in a dream, exposing the true situation to him direct. Abraham was a prophet and an intercessor in prayer, as the king is told (v.7), yet in this matter he is ignored by God.

Responding to the word of God, Abimelech acted very rightly, indeed very handsomely, and in a way that really served as a rebuke to Abraham. Sarah too came in for Abimelech's rebuke, as verse 16 records. Speaking of Abraham as her "brother" added a touch of irony to his rebuke. It is a sad situation when an upright man of the world can rightly rebuke the saint of God. But it is a state of affairs all too often reproduced. Abraham evidently accepted the rebuke and, as God had said, he prayed for the king and his household, and the hand of God which had been upon them in His government was removed.

*It is a sad situation when
an upright man of the world
can rightly rebuke the saint of God.*

Notwithstanding this lapse on Abraham's part, God fulfilled to him and Sarah the promise of a son (21:1ff). That which, humanly, was impossible came to pass, and Isaac was born, as we may say, on the principle of resurrection: a living child springing from parents who from a reproductive standpoint were dead. Now Sarah could laugh indeed, and feel that all others would laugh with her (21:6). This time her laughter had in it nothing of incredulity, but was rather a note of triumph in what the power of God had brought to pass.

The sign of the covenant – circumcision (see 17:9ff) – was duly put upon Isaac; and when he was weaned a great feast was made, which Ishmael treated as a subject of mockery (21:9). This led to the casting out of the bondwoman and her son, and this has an allegorical significance, as we learn in Galatians 4:22ff, Hagar representing the old covenant, Sara the new. Four centuries had yet to pass before the covenant of law was established at Sinai, and before, many more centuries later, the basis on which the new covenant of promise rests was laid in the death of Christ. But thus early in the world's history do we get presented in an allegorical way the supplanting of the old covenant by the new (see Galatians 4:30,31). The law only produced bondage (v.24), since it addressed itself to the flesh; that is, to man's fallen nature which is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can it be (Romans 8:7). The son of the freewoman – Isaac – came into being by an act of God in grace, and therefore aptly typifies the new covenant. We believers are “the children of promise,” as Isaac was (Galatians 4:28).

The son of the bondwoman had to be “cast out” (4:30; cp. Genesis 21:10), and the initiative sprang from Sarah. Doing this to Hagar and Ishmael was very grievous to Abraham (v.11). This feature too we may apply to ourselves. To give up all hope of blessing on the ground of law, and to dispossess the flesh, is not something that naturally pleases us, but the reverse. Still it is the course that is according to God. Sarah, indeed, may not have had much thought of God in her demand, nevertheless God endorsed it. God said in effect to Abraham, “You have got the promised seed in Isaac so let not the departure of Ishmael be a grief to you.”

We see the same thing in principle in 1 Samuel 16:1, where the prophet is bidden to stop grieving over Saul whom God had set aside, for there was a far

*If Christ, the Second Man, fills our vision,
the first man is set aside*

better king in view, namely, David. God takes away the first, “that He may establish the second” (Hebrews 10: 9). If Christ, the Second Man, fills our vision, the first man and the covenant of law that applied to him are set aside. Bidden thus by God, Abraham acted with decision (Genesis 21:14ff). Early in the morning he rose up and dismissed the bondwoman and her son, giving them bread and water for the start of their journey. True to her name, the poor woman became a wanderer in the wilderness, and soon all their slender resources were gone, the lad being brought almost to the point of death. The apostle James tells us, in connection with Job, “that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy” (James 5:11, KJV). We see it exemplified here. Though Hagar and Ishmael had this unhappy allegorical significance, and though they personally belonged to the world rather than to the house of faith, they were needy creatures, and as such objects of mercy. Years before, an angel had been dispatched to her assistance (Genesis 16:7ff). Now, once again, poor Hagar is at the end of her resources and weeping in her misery. A second time God intervenes by an angel for deliverance (21:16ff).

It is rather remarkable that while the record runs that she “lift up her voice and wept,” it adds that, “God heard the voice of the lad.” Ishmael must now have been about fifteen years old, and he had raised his voice for help, for he was dying for lack of water. The deliverance came in a simple yet unexpected way. God opened Hagar’s eyes so that she saw a well of water (v.19). It was there all the time, but she had not had eyes to discern it.

Is there not in this a parable for today? Ishmael was dying of thirst within a stone’s throw of the life-giving water. There are many today going down to spiritual death with the means of spiritual life right before them. The trouble is they have no eyes to see it. God opened her eyes and immediately the need was met. We need to pray for men, that no longer may the god of this world blind their minds to the light of the gospel, as indicated in 2 Corinthians 4:4.

Thus Ishmael was granted life in spite of the fact that his descendants would be inimical to the people of God. And not only that, but God was with him, enabling him to maintain himself in the wilderness by his skill as an archer. His mother came from Egypt, and out of Egypt she took a wife for him. In this we see the stamp of the world riveted upon him (Genesis 21:20-21).

In the latter part of chapter 21 Abimelech again appears (vv.22ff), and once more we behold him in a favourable light. He was a man of discernment, and he perceived that God was with Abraham in all that he was doing in spite of the fact that his doings in Gerar had not been right. When our first contact with a man is unfavourable, it takes some discernment to see him subsequently in a

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do observe very narrowly the professed saints of God*

favourable light. Abimelech and his chief captain had evidently been watching Abraham very closely, and this was the conclusion they had come to. Let us remind ourselves by this incident that thoughtful men of the world do observe very narrowly the professed saints of God, and we may well desire that the conclusion they draw may be as favourable as in this case. Too often, alas, it is otherwise.

In result, a covenant was drawn up, and the well, Beer-sheba, was made sure to Abraham (21:31), a well that in later days became famous as the southern boundary of the land. There for some years Abraham made his dwelling, and there he called on the LORD as the everlasting God (v.33). When the promise of Isaac was given, God had made Himself known as the Almighty (17:1). Now that the promised heir is born and the promise redeemed, Abraham recognizes Him to be the Everlasting as well as the Almighty. Abraham had had to wait for the promise to be fulfilled, and, man being a creature of brief years, this waiting is to the flesh a very trying business. But to God as the Everlasting One, time is not of prime importance. He moves with deliberate yet certain steps, to the accomplishment of what He has counselled and promised. In the Psalms we hear the godly man more than once crying out, "How long?" How long shall the wicked flourish; how long before righteousness be vindicated? (e.g. Psalms 6:3; 13:1; 35:17) We in our day may cry out "How long?" as we desire the promised advent of the Lord Jesus. But with Isaiah we have to know that, "the everlasting God . . . fainteth not neither is weary; there is no searching of His understanding" (40:28). His way and time are perfect. With this let us be content.

From Scripture Truth 36(1948-50), pp. 174-6; slightly edited

*The everlasting God . . .
fainteth not neither is weary*

Canaan Possessed: Studies in Ephesians and Joshua

by John Blackburn, with appendix by Tom Tyson

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A collection of articles from Scripture Truth magazine on the subject of “The Christian’s Canaan”. They explore the way in which the Old Testament book of Joshua illuminates the themes of the New Testament letter to the Ephesians.

For the Israelite nation, escape from Egypt was followed by troubled years in the wilderness before reaching Canaan, the Promised Land. But, having arrived, they were only able to take possession of those parts of it on which they could walk; and this meant warfare. Some see the Christian experience mirrored in this: a constant daily struggle, with little encouragement until the wilderness and warfare experience is ended and rest is obtained eternally in Heaven — the Father’s house — the promised land.

The author demonstrates clearly from Scripture that enjoyment of the Christian’s eternal inheritance begins *now*.

“To know the love of Christ is the corn and the wine, the milk and honey, the wealth and plenty of the Christian’s Canaan. It is the pure delight of a day which will know no evening shade.”

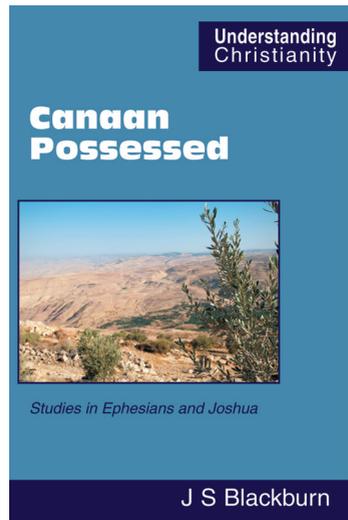
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Part 1: Studies in Ephesians;

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Part 3: Bible Study: The Book of Joshua – Chapters 1 to 12;

Appendix: The Sound of The Silver Trumpets (*by Tom Tyson*)



Two days

John 11:6; Hebrews 2:17

The truest heart that ever loved
could give its object pain,
could bear to see the suffering
that brought the untold gain.

The mightiest hand that ever moved
could wait to bring relief:
two days' apparent heedlessness
of nature's deepest grief.

Would they have missed that sacred thing,
His sympathy, His tears
—scene on which breaking hearts have leaned
o'er eighteen hundred years?

The wonder-working word that gave
their loved one back again
seems scarce as precious as the groans
that proved He shared their pain.

Oh, Heart that loves so perfectly!
Thou often waitest still;
and blessèd are the emptied hearts
Thy sympathy can fill.

Ora Rowan 1834 - 79