

Scripture Truth

The Rapture

What Does the Bible Say About...Money?

Lessons from Ezra

Some Problems Christians Face...Temptation

Eternal Life

Lessons from Isaiah ch.40 for Today

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SCRIPTURE TRUTH

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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

The Rapture

Jonathan Hughes

“Surely I am coming quickly” is the last promise of the Lord Jesus in Scripture. But is this coming for the Church only or for the whole world? It is important to understand clearly what the Bible teaches about this important event. This helpful article is based on a talk, the first in a series on ‘Future Events’, given at the Young Peoples’ Christian Conference in 2002.

Since the bombing of the Twin Towers in New York, there has been increased interest in future events. Even those who would not normally read the Bible have shown some interest as to what it has to say about the future. Sadly, there is much confusion amongst Christians as to what the Bible does teach about future events. Today, more than ever, it is essential to understand clearly what the Bible has to say, and to stick to that alone.

Between the idea and the reality

Between the motion and the act

Falls the shadow. (T.S.Eliot)

As we shall see, the events at Calvary demand an answer. This will be given when the Lord Jesus returns for His Church. Now in 2003, His coming casts its ever increasing shadow.

The word ‘rapture’ does not appear in the Bible. It simply means ‘to snatch up’, an excellent description of what will happen when Jesus returns. Before going any further, we should read John 14:1-3; 1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 50-52; Philippians 3:20,21; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. We shall consider our subject by asking a series of very simple questions.

Who will come?

John 14:3 makes quite clear that it will be Jesus Himself. The task is too important to entrust to an angel or any other. Ephesians 5:25-27 describe Christ loving

the Church in the same way that a man loves his wife! On our wedding day, how many of us considered sending someone else in our place to the church for the ceremony?! That was something we longed to do ourselves. In just the same way, the Lord Jesus longs for the moment when He receives from His Father the command to receive us unto Himself. From the very beginning, God had decreed that it was not good for a man to be alone (Genesis 2:18). Praise God! The Lord Jesus will not be alone in heaven!

How will He come?

1 Thessalonians 4:16 tells us that He will come with a shout, with the voice of an archangel and with the trumpet of God. The word for ‘shout’ is unusual and signifies ‘a clear call to one’s own’. For instance, a commanding officer might shout a command to his men, expecting only them to obey. A soldier in a different company would not respond to that command. Jesus’ call will be heard by all those who love Him, but only by those. It will be unmistakable and clear, and we will respond to it without a moment’s thought. In John 10 we read of the Shepherd who calls His own sheep by name and leads them out. The sheep follow Him for they know His voice. Jesus adds, “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me”. As a child, I may have wondered how we were

going to get up to heaven! His voice has all the power I need to join Him, in just the same way that Peter found he could walk on water when the Master called!

1 Corinthians 15:52 adds that this will all take place “in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye”. The world at large will not hear or see the Saviour, but it will see the consequences of the Rapture. Imagine 1 in 20 people disappearing from your street! The populations of some countries will be decimated, easy pickings for predatory neighbours. Companies will collapse as the workforce disappears; classes will stop as the teacher vanishes. The Rapture is a truly wonderful time for the Church, but the beginning of a time of unparalleled terror for the world.

Where will He come?

1 Thessalonians 4:17 tells us that we will meet Him “in the air”. It is important to note two things in these words. Firstly, the verb translated ‘meet’ means ‘to join with and return to’ where He has come from. It is quite specific. It is not a general meeting, nor even that we meet Him and He returns with us to where we came from.

And it is “in the air”. That realm, which is peculiarly the domain of Satan (Ephesians 2:2), is where we meet the Lord! The Rapture is not a secretive sneaking through enemy lines. It is a glorious triumph on Satan’s home ground! For too long has Satan, in his opposition to the Lord Jesus, caused so much misery

A glorious triumph on Satan’s home ground!

amongst the Church. For nearly 2,000 years Jesus has allowed this to be. But let us not for one minute believe that Satan is as powerful as Jesus. We will meet the Lord where He chooses, and nothing can stop Him!

Who will be involved?

Each and every believer on the Lord Jesus will be joined to Him at the Rapture. None will miss out. The dead in Christ will be raised momentarily before those who are alive on earth at His coming. Let us stop for a moment and consider this glorious fact. For the first time since its creation, the Church will be unified, whole and complete. No more divisions! No more separations! For the first time, acting together as one! What a joy it will be to Him! “He shall see of the travail of His soul, and be satisfied” (Isaiah 53:11). If this is what I am going to be, then surely it should be what I am aiming for now (Philippians 3:14).

Why will He come?

We will consider three reasons here. Firstly, He is coming to take us home! One can imagine the deep longing of the few godly Jews in captivity as they recalled Zephaniah’s prophecy, “I will bring you home” (3:20). No more sin, no more half-heartedness, no more weakness and failure, no more problems! The call of Home is something that should be very precious to each believer.

Secondly, He is coming to make us like Himself. “Conformed to His glorious body” (Philippians 3:21). “We shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is” (1 John 3:2).

Thirdly, He is coming so that we might be delivered from the judgment that is to

come on the earth (1 Thessalonians 1:10; 2 Thessalonians 2:7; Revelation 3:10). At the cross, Jesus dealt with all our sins and their penalty. We are no longer to come under the judgment of God. There is no more condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1).

When will He come?

Sadly, today, there is much confusion as to when this wonderful event will take place. Many believers expect the world to be increasingly saved before His triumphant return to reign. Others would see His return only just before His return to reign. The Rapture is the next event on God’s prophetic calendar. It occurs at least seven years (the period known as the Tribulation) before He appears to the world, and then sets up His kingdom for 1,000 years.

Why do we believe this to be so? No single verse of the Bible gives the whole picture. The verse which comes closest to indicating that the Rapture precedes the Tribulation is Revelation 3:10. Placing the Rapture before the Tribulation, before the Appearing, before the Millennium is the simplest scheme that fits all the facts. We will look at some of the reasons for teaching that the Rapture must occur before the start of the Tribulation.

1. The nature of the Tribulation

Wrath (Revelation 6:17) but not for us (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10)

Judgment (Revelation 14:7) but not for us (1 Thessalonians 5:9)

Indignation (Isaiah 26:20,21) but not for us (Revelation 3:10)

Punishment (Isaiah 24:21) but not for us (Revelation 2:22)

Hour of trial (Revelation 3:10)

Time of Jacob’s trouble (Jeremiah 30:7).

The whole character of the Tribulation is incompatible with the promises that we have been given as believers on the Lord Jesus.

2. Daniel’s prophecy. Daniel ch.9 foretells 70 seven year periods. The first 69 have already taken place and concerned Israel. The 70th – the seven years of the Tribulation – is still to come. The Church had no place in the first 69, so it would seem strange for it to be involved in the 70th.
3. Character of the Church. The hope of the Church is heavenly (Philippians 3:20); we are perfect in Him (Ephesians 5:27). We do not need the Tribulation to make us ready for Him; we are ready now. The Church is a unified body in His sight; we will all be raptured together.
4. Opposite characteristics of the Rapture and the Appearing. A common mistake is to confuse these two events, and yet they are clearly different. There are no signs to indicate when the Rapture will be, though there are many signs associated with His Appearing. The Rapture is not seen by the whole world, but the Appearing is a very visible event. The Rapture is a return for blessing, whilst the Appearing is a return for judgment. We do not read about the Rapture in the Old Testament, although the Appearing appears prominently in it.
5. The interpretation of Revelation. This book becomes doubly difficult to understand if the Church is on earth

during the Tribulation. Who are the elders in heaven in ch.4, if not representatives of the Church? Why are Christians not specifically mentioned in chapters 4 onwards as being on the earth?

6. The work of the Restrainer. 2 Thessalonians 2 speaks about the Restrainer being removed before the man of lawlessness is revealed. This statement is best understood if the Holy Spirit is the Restrainer. But the Holy Spirit cannot be removed from the earth if Christians are present on it since He indwells them. His removal must indicate that the Church has already been removed from the earth.
7. The problem of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. Several of the Christians in Thessalonica were worried. They had listened to Paul as he told them about the Lord's return. Now what would happen to those who had already died? Would they miss out on the blessing of the Lord's return? So Paul had to write this letter to answer their question. Now if all believers were to go through the Tribulation, there would be no cause for concern. The dead believers would be the fortunate ones! To live during the Tribulation is to suffer. The fact that these Thessalonian believers had a problem indicates that they understood that the Rapture occurs before the start of the Tribulation.
8. Could Christians really obey 1 Timothy 2:1-4 in relation to the government of the Beast? If not, why is there no direct instruction in any of the epistles as to how we should

behave during this most critical period?

9. Who comes with Jesus at His Appearing? If the Church is on earth, then it cannot come with Him from heaven. So who does? There cannot, at the same time, be two different ways to be saved. At present, we preach the Gospel of God's grace; during the Tribulation, the Gospel of the kingdom will be preached (Revelation chs. 11,14).
10. Revelation 12:5-12. In these verses, Israel is clearly the object of Satan's attack. Why is it not the Church, which is so precious to Christ, if the Church is still on the earth?
11. Condition of the false church, Babylon (Revelation chs.17,18). This is seen as completely corrupt and is destroyed. No mention is made of a faithful remnant of true believers.
12. Agreement of Old Testament pictures. Whilst the Rapture is not specifically mentioned in the Old Testament, there are pictures of it e.g. Enoch taken to heaven whilst Noah is preserved through the judgment of the flood; Lot is saved and Sodom is destroyed.

In the early church, believers expected Jesus to come at any time. There was nothing to be fulfilled before His return, unlike the many unfulfilled prophecies which relate to His Appearing. As

*Look for Jesus, not
for signs*

Christians, we are to look for Jesus, not for signs, as we wait for His return. Nothing remains to be fulfilled before His coming (Philippians 4:5; James 5:8). Jesus taught His disciples that, when they saw certain signs, they would know that His Appearing was near. The two events, then, must be separate.

As we look at the condition of today's world, many would agree that, although we cannot put a date on His return at the Rapture, it must be very soon – probably months or years, rather than decades or centuries!

How does this affect me?

All this may seem rather academic. After all, the Rapture will happen in the way it happens, and we cannot do anything about it. However, there are at least three important ways in which it should affect us.

Firstly, we need to be saved! There will be no second chance (2 Thessalonians 2:11-12).

Secondly, we need to be ready! If I knew that Jesus' return was in 10 days' time, I would not miss the last opportunity to attend the Breaking of Bread, or the prayer meeting! There are things which we can do for Him only whilst we are here on earth. Saying 'Thank You' at His Supper is one such. One day we will attend this meeting for the very last time. I should, therefore, approach this remembrance with the freshness that His return requires.

Satan is so busy today, trying to get us to give up! Being faithful becomes increasingly hard. It would be such a shame if I gave up today, only for Him to return tomorrow. Sadly today, one believer will

not talk to another. Is this really the way we want to enter His presence? The time for conflict resolution is now, today. I may not be able to solve all the problems that there are, but His return demands that I do not have any outstanding quarrels left unresolved.

Thirdly, we need to be watching! The Lord had to say to His disciples, "What, could you not watch with Me one hour?" We can almost sense the hurt in His voice as He found His disciples asleep. And yet we are no better. The Lord warned His church at Sardis, "Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you" (Revelation 3:3). The description of His return as a thief is no better than that for unbelievers! Will the Lord return and we will not even be expecting Him, let alone be ready for Him?! After 2,000 years of general failure, the Church's absolute shame, the ultimate disappointment for Him, should be that His bride was so little looking for His return. We may individually fail Him in so many ways. Let us resolve, at least, not to fail Him at the end.

As we end this look at His return, it is fitting to close with the promise made to the church at Philadelphia, "Behold, I come quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown" (Revelation 3:11).

*Behold, I come
quickly!*

What Does the Bible Say About...?

4. Money

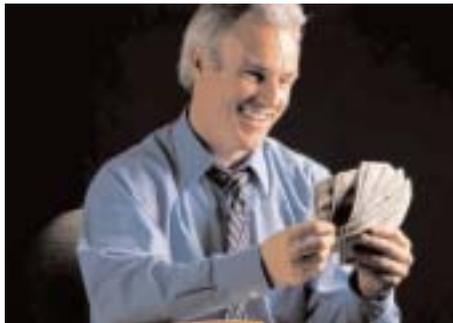
John Keable

From childhood days and pocket money, through our wage earning days, and finally in retirement, money plays a lesser or greater part in our lives. How important it is that we have our thinking on this important subject moulded by what Scripture teaches.

Probably one of the most mis-quoted verses in the Bible is the one about money. “Money is the root of all evil” is the popular mis-quotation. What the Bible actually says is, “The *love of money* is the (or, a) root of all evil” (1 Timothy 6:10).

“Money makes the world go round” is another popular quotation, although this one has no biblical basis. Solomon, in Ecclesiastes 10:19, seems to agree with this when he writes, “Money is the answer for everything”.

So, straight away, we have two completely contrasting views on the subject of money. On the one hand, to love it will lead us into evil; on the other hand, it is so important a commodity that we can rarely do without it. What can the Bible teach us about the vital use, and abuse, of money?



Money can be a very good servant, but it can be a ruthless master!

Money and slavery

The very first mention of money in the Bible is in Genesis 17:12,13,23. These verses concern the circumcision of servants who had been bought into Jewish households. They were bought with money. Straight away, then, we are faced with the issue of slavery; in the days of Abraham, it was an acceptable practice. It continued to be so in the western world until about 150 years ago; in some parts of the world, it is still regarded as an acceptable practice. Interestingly, the first mentions of money in the books of Exodus and Leviticus are also concerned with the issue of slavery (Exodus 12:44; Leviticus 22:11).

What can we learn from what the Bible has to say about money and slavery? Simply this: money can be a very good servant, but it can be a ruthless master! In

the book of Genesis, we get several examples of this: Abraham used money to purchase a field in which he could bury his wife, Sarah (23:9-13). It is interesting that this, the second mention of money in the Bible, concerns the subject of death. The field which Abraham bought became a burial ground for his descendants for many years.

Later, Jacob also bought a plot of land (33:18-20). This time, the land was to be used as a place to live in and a place to worship God. Here we reach the end of any good uses of money in the book of Genesis.

In 31:15, Rachel and Leah accuse their father, Laban, of having sold them to Jacob, adding that he had already spent the money he had received for them.

In chs. 42-44, we get the interesting story of Joseph, the son of Jacob, who was sold into slavery by his brothers. In these chapters, Joseph has reached the position of Prime Minister of Egypt. When his brothers come to buy food, he orders that their money be returned to them. When they found their money returned, instead of thinking that God had worked a miracle for them, they saw it as a sign of punishment for their past sins.

Later, during the great famine of Egypt, we read that Joseph reduced the whole land to slavery (47:21). With their money gone, the Egyptians were forced to sell themselves for food and grain. Joseph ordered that 20% of the Egyptians earnings should be paid to Pharaoh. At the time Genesis was written, the law was still in force (47:26). Thus, Joseph introduced the idea of income tax!

Money and God's work

There are instructions given for financial contributions to the work of God (Exodus 30:16). In this case, the giving was for the work of the Tabernacle. All through the Bible, we are presented with the idea of the work of God being financially supported by His people. Acts 11:27-30 gives an example of a Christian collection to give aid to brethren in need. God's people individually are expected to give to Him first (1 Corinthians 16:1-4).

Money and humanity

When we value God correctly, our value of other people and of our possessions will naturally fall into place.

An interesting reference to money is found in Leviticus 25:37. This forbids the adding of interest on loans given to help the poor out of trouble. In this book, God also gives instructions for the purchasing and redemption of property (27:15, 18,19).

From the book of Leviticus, then, we learn God's concern for human rights and for justice. As God's people, if we have money, we are expected to help those who are less fortunate. This thought is expanded in the book of James (1:27): “to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world”. This is James' description of true religion.

In Deuteronomy 2:6, God instructs His people to buy food and water from those who were not part of God's community. When the Israelites attempted to do this, their neighbours were not willing to trade. Here is a valuable lesson: we are to buy, sell and trade with those who do not accept our faith and way of life. If they

refuse to have anything to do with us, then that is their affair; we are not to be prejudiced against anybody.

In Deuteronomy 21:14, we have an interesting note about human rights. If a man was to marry a female slave, the marriage effectively released her from her slavery. If the marriage did not work out, she was not to be sold for money; she was to be set free. Here, we have an insight into the value God puts upon marriage.

When Elisha, in the power of God, cleansed Naaman of leprosy, Elisha refused to take any payment. Later, when his servant tried to charge Naaman for God's blessing, Elisha rebuked him severely (2 Kings 5:26,27).

Money or God

Deuteronomy 14:22-27 gives instructions about tithing and the proper use of our goods and money. One tenth of everything earned was to be given to God, the rest was to be spent and enjoyed just as His people chose. There was one proviso: they were to look after those who worked full time for God. This, it seems, was in addition to their tithing.

In Deuteronomy 23:17-20, God expresses His concern, first for holiness, then for justice. In the first instance, God forbade His people to sell themselves into prostitution, and did not allow money earned by prostitutes, male and female, to be put into God's treasury. Here we have a lesson in holiness and in how to behave in God's house. In the second case, interest was not to be charged on loans of money or food to God's people. Interest could be charged to those outside of God's family – another indication that business is acceptable outside the circle of fellow-

ship. If we are to be blessed by God, we must make a difference in our dealings with those in fellowship and those without. It goes without saying that all our dealings will be characterised by uprightness.

Money does not get a very good write-up in the book of Judges; the first mention is in 5:19. The people of God, under the command of Deborah, had won a mighty victory. However, they took no plunder from their enemies. The normal practice would have been to take anything of value, including money. Here, however, they did not want it.

Two other mentions of money are made, but both with horrific consequences. In 16:18, we read of Samson's betrayal by Delilah for money. Obviously, money was what she really loved! In the next chapter, 17:2-4, a man called Micah stole some money from his mother. Later, however, he returned it. She took the money, melted it down, and made an idol from it.

The lesson from Judges is that, in a very real way, money can become a false god. No wonder Jesus later had to say, "You cannot serve both God and Money" (Matthew 6:24).

In 1 Kings 21:2-15, we read the story of Naboth. He valued his vineyard, which he saw as a trust from God, more than all the money King Ahab offered him. His love of his vineyard and his refusal to sell it cost Naboth his life. Wise old Solomon wrote, "Money can buy protection, but wisdom can preserve a life" (Ecclesiastes 7:12). He goes on to say (in a life where God is left out), "Money is the answer for everything" (10:19).

One of Israel's biggest failings was that the people spent money on everything except God (Isaiah 43:24). Money is useless when it comes to redemption. That gift of God cannot be bought – it is free. The question is, "Why waste money on things that do not satisfy?" (55:1,2).

In the last reference to money in the Old Testament (Micah 3:11), the leaders of the people give their legal judgments in exchange for money; the priests teach for money; and the prophets prophesy for money. Such is the low state that has come upon those who are "lovers of [money] rather than lovers of God" (2 Timothy 3:4).

The first reference to money in the New Testament is the statement by the Lord Jesus which we have already considered, "You cannot serve God and Money" (Matthew 6:24). Either money will drag you away from the love of God, or God will draw you away from the love of money! Jesus used money to make the point that tax is due to the state; more important, however, is the honour that is due to God (Matthew 22:19-21). An example of one who served money rather than God is seen in Judas' betrayal of the Lord (Matthew 26:15).

Luke 18:18-25 gives the account of the rich young ruler who thought more of his money than of his eternal welfare. In happy contrast, 19:2-10 tells the story of Zaccheus, a rich man, who found something more important than money – a relationship with God.

The story of the widow's offering of two mites is very challenging! God does not look at how much we give; He looks at how much we have left. So Jesus com-

mented, "All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on" (Luke 21:1-4).

Barnabas brought his money and laid it at the feet of the apostles, a picture of his devotion to God (Acts 4:37). However, in 5:1-11, we find Ananias and Sapphira who pretended to do the same but, in reality, kept some money for themselves. Keeping back some money was not wrong in itself; trying to make themselves more righteous than they were was a sin. It cost them their lives!

Simon the sorcerer tried to buy the gift of the Holy Spirit with money. However, God's blessings cannot be bought; they are gifts to those who trust in Him (see Acts 8:18-20).

The Roman governor, Felix, hoped Paul would offer him money in exchange for freedom. Paul, however, was confident in God and refused to offer bribes (Acts 24:26).

Final thoughts and conclusion

The verses we have considered have made specific references to 'money'. One other reference of note is 1 Corinthians 16:1,2: "On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income..."



Paul does not say how much each should set aside. As we have seen, God is more interested in what we do with the money we do not put into the collection (Mark 12:41-44).

Money is for our use, but if we are not careful, it can take control and dominate all we do, say and think. Let us make sure

that, for us, money is a good servant. It is all too easy to allow it to become a bad master.

We need to take to heart the words of the Lord Jesus, "You cannot serve God and Money" (Matthew 6:24) and "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Luke 12:34).

You cannot serve God and Money

Lessons from Ezra

Part 4

Ted Murray

Practical obedience to the Word of God is more necessary today than ever. We live in days like those of the judges when "everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25). Be encouraged as you read the story of one man who was ready to be obedient and of the blessing which that brought.

Ezra the man (ch.7)

His background

Some 78 years have passed since the return of the Jews under Zerubbabel in the reign of Cyrus to Jerusalem, and some 56-58 years since the completion of the Temple. Many of the returned remnant had lost their zeal for God. Some had married and been given in marriage to the people of the land, thereby absorbing their customs. The following generations had very little appreciation of what God had done in bringing them back from Babylon and

establishing the centre of worship in Jerusalem.

Nevertheless, God was continuing His work through devout Mordecai and his niece, Esther. Through their faithfulness and courage, God preserved the Jews throughout the Persian empire. Amongst these would be Ezra and Nehemiah. This was also a period of great political significance. The expansion of the Persian empire had been halted by the Greeks at the battles of Marathon, Thermopylae and Salamis.

There is surely a message for us today in this. The Lord's message to the church at

His pedigree

Ezra's pedigree is given in vv.1-5. He was probably the great-great grandson of Seraiah, the High Priest, who was killed by Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kings 25:18-21). His genealogy also included Hilkiyah who "found the book of the Law in the house of the LORD" (2 Kings 22:8) and was responsible for the revival in the days of

His ability

Vv.6-10 bear testimony to Ezra. He was a skilled scribe in the Law of Moses. Here was a man who had a deep knowledge of God's word. If we want to be marked out by God for a particular service, we also need to have a good understanding of Scripture. "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Psalm 119:105). Here there is both illumination on the way so that we need not stumble

Ephesus, "Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love" (Revelation 2:4) would remind us how far the church has fallen and how much ground we have let slip. Yet it was in just this kind of situation with the Jews that God raised up His servant, Ezra. We should be encouraged that, in a day of breakdown, God has His servants who are true to His word and can be used for the restoration of God's testimony.

In ch.7, Ezra is just such a servant of the Lord. The chapter opens with another king on the throne. During his reign, there is another awakening, or perhaps it should be called a reawakening, of the Jews with God's marked out servant, Ezra, the leader. The chapter is a wonderful character study of Ezra. Here we see that, although he had the confidence of the king, he was identified with the people of God. He was willing to be amongst those who were willing to sacrifice the comforts of a relatively easy life for one of hardship in the place where God had set His name.

Josiah. His line, which included the loyal Zadok who became High Priest during David's reign, could be traced right back to Phinehas, whose javelin had turned aside the wrath of God, and to whom God gave "My covenant of peace" and to his descendants a covenant of an everlasting priesthood (Numbers 25:6-13).

Phinehas was a man who was zealous for God. His act had made atonement for the children of Israel; God rewarded his faithfulness. We see those same characteristics in Ezra. In our day, we can be thankful for those faithful families who continue to serve the Lord in meekness and godly fear. Timothy had a mother and grandmother who had genuine faith (2 Timothy 1:5). Many today can be thankful for parents, grandparents and, in some cases, great grandparents who, in their generation, made known the message of the Gospel and lived accordingly. Do we, in turn, pass on such a heritage to the generations following?

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path



and light surrounding our walk so that others may see and be attracted. People were attracted to Ezra and were prepared to follow him.

Ezra sought the king's permission for himself and his companions

to leave Babylon for Jerusalem. "The king granted him all his request, according to the hand of the LORD his God upon him" (v.6). Here was a man who, being in the secret of God's mind, walked according to God's will. This resulted in God's favour resting upon him and upon those who were prepared with him to suffer the hardship of the testimony to God's name rather than enjoying the ease of Babylon. It was a long journey, taking four months (v.9), before they arrived in Jerusalem. Again we read that the good hand of the Lord was upon them. The words suggest that Ezra recognised that, without the Lord's help, he could do nothing. Are we aware that, without that same help, our efforts will also be useless? Unless we have the hand of the Lord upon us, unless we walk by His word and are in His will, our efforts will be unfruitful and become tiresome to us. We will become religious! The lukewarmness which characterised the church at Laodicea will be ours and so will be the consequences (Revelation 3:16).

His attitude

Ezra prepared his heart to seek the Law of the Lord and to do it (v.10). This was what developed his abilities. He realised

that the Scriptures, which had been graciously preserved during the exile, were given by God. This gave him a reverential appreciation of the sacred text. "The secret of the LORD is with those who fear Him" (Psalm 25:14). We should have no less an appreciation. We need constantly to remind ourselves that "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16,17).

Then, with this reverential fear and godliness, he had studied the Scriptures, diligently and no doubt methodically. He not only read the word but sought out its meaning and purpose. Ezra was marked by a preparedness to apply the Scriptures to his life. His was not just an academic knowledge which might give him a certain kudos. He was a man who scrupulously obeyed the Word of God, lived in the good of it, and was able to fulfil the will of God in his day. "If any man will do His will, he shall know of the doctrine" (John 7:17; see also James 1:25).

The result of continuing and not forgetting, but doing, the word is that blessing follows. Ezra was a good example of a man of the Book. He interpreted, unfolded and taught the meaning of God's word to God's people. The result of the application of that word to his own life was that he was able, and fitted, to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel (v.10). Do we take time to study the Word of God for ourselves and apply it to our lives, or is our knowledge of it all second-hand? The result of second-hand knowledge can only be weakness.

His reputation

In vv.11 onwards, we see the result of Ezra's petition and the high esteem in which King Artaxerxes held Ezra. The king's letter states that Ezra was the priest and a scribe expert in the commandments of the Lord and His statutes to Israel. In this way, Ezra worshipped, worked and walked in the light of what had been revealed in his studies of the Word of God. The king's letter is remarkable in that it contains not only commendation but also a decree to the people who volunteer to go up to Jerusalem, an instruction, a reminder of the task before them, a passport, provision for the journey and, finally, a direct commission to Ezra from the king. The letter is in Aramaic, the language of the realm.

In His providential ways, God safeguarded Ezra and his companions on the long, hazardous journey to Jerusalem. In ch.8, Ezra's companions are listed and their faithfulness is noted. Here in ch.7, the subject is Ezra the man. The letter, however, indicates only a patron and servant relationship between the king and Ezra. It fails to recognise that the hand of the Lord was upon Ezra (v.28). The letter, although by the hand of the king, was God's doing. The result is a marvellous picture of God's governmental dealings in the restoration of the testimony.

As with Cyrus' decree, there is no coercion of the Jews to leave Babylon. Permission was given to any or all of the people of Israel who volunteered, to go with Ezra. As has already been stated, God does not force His people, but He removes every legal barrier for those who

have the heart and the courage to go back to the place where His house has been established. The long sentence in vv.14-17 is broken up by the word 'whereas'. There is first of all the king's desire to know what is happening in Judea. Then there is the trust that the king and his counsellors had in Ezra to be faithful with the treasures they gave him. Finally, we have the people's confidence in Ezra, entrusting him with their free-will offerings. This all resulted in Ezra and his companions having full liberty to be engaged in the worship and service of the Lord. Moreover, assurance was given that their needs would be met.

God is no man's debtor. Paul's assurance is equally ours today: "My God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:19). That epistle clearly shows how God had provided all that was needed for His service. Although we are responsible to carry out the service of the Lord, we should never forget that God is in charge of the resources. If Romans 12:1 reminds us of our obligations to the Lord, Philippians 4:19 gives us the source of the resources needed to enable us to be fully engaged in that service.

The challenge for us today is whether we are fully aware of what is our "reasonable (or, intelligent) service" and whether we have experienced those resources from the good hand of God. If we were in the good of these things, then we might see greater blessing, resulting in numbers being added to the church. We would be bringing in greater measure "the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name" (Hebrews 13:15). Not only would this be

a sweet savour unto God, but it would also be an attraction, like the smoke rising from the brazen altar, to those who do not know the Lord.

His joy In the final two verses (vv.27-28), we have an outburst of praise and worship. Ezra gives God all the glory. He can hardly contain himself as he sees God moving the heart of the king to grant him and his companions permission to go to Jerusalem. The realisation that God “is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us” (Ephesians 3:20) was paramount in Ezra’s life. Do we have this same confidence? Are we available to the Lord so that He might exhibit His power in us? Paul could write, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13).

That power and strength might seem to be somewhat lacking in the church today. It is all too easy to see failure, despondency, breakdown and dwindling numbers. Let us take courage in the fact that the Word of God is still the same, the power of God has not diminished. The Lord, as Head of His Church, is still able to work to His praise and glory, even in this day as He did in Ezra’s day.

*The hand of the LORD
my God was upon me*

Ezra realised that it was the mercy of God which had brought about the blessing. That same mercy of God met us when we were dead in our sins (Ephesians 2:4:8). In these verses, we are reminded of the greatness of the riches which have been given us, of the power of God to transform our lives, of the blessing we share with Christ in the heavenly places in order that God might show forth the riches of His grace in a day to come. What a great God we have! Like Ezra, we can say, “The hand of the LORD my God was upon me” (v.28).

Let us be encouraged as we realise that our Lord Jesus is “the same, yesterday, today, and forever” (Hebrews 13:8). Let us, like Ezra, be willing to allow God to use us. That same Word of God is still our resource, though we possess it in fuller measure than was available to Ezra. It may be that our attitude is not as keen as it once was, that our testimony has become dull. If only we had a reputation like Ezra’s! Then, but only then, would we see that same hand of God upon us in blessing. May God challenge our hearts as we read about a man of old who studied, applied, taught, obeyed, and lived in the light of God’s Word!

Some Problems Christians Face

1. Temptation – how do I overcome it?

Gordon Kell

Satan is a past master in the art of temptation. After all, he has had thousands of years of experience in thus opposing the people of God. None of us, in ourselves, is immune from his attacks. We need all the help we can get to enable us to deal with his temptations. This article is based on a talk first broadcast on London’s Premier Radio.

Near the edge

A wealthy lady, who had a great estate and many servants, advertised for a coach driver. During the interviews for the job, she presented each of the applicants with a problem. “On the approach to my estate, the road is very narrow with a steep incline at each side. How near to the edge of that part of the road could you drive?” she asked each of the applicants. The first applicant answered, “I could drive your coach to within one foot of the edge of the road and you would be safe”. The second coach driver was even more confident. “I could safely drive to within six inches of the edge of the road,” he replied. When the last coach driver was presented with the problem, he looked steadfastly at the lady and said, “Madam, I would stay as far from the edge as possible”. He got the job!

When we are faced with temptation, which coach driver are we like? Do we go as near to the edge as we can, or do we make sure that we stay as far away from it as possible? I am, of course, referring to temptation to sin. Temptation is some-

times used in the Bible to describe trials allowed by God which have a beneficial purpose and effect.

The first temptation

The first temptation in the Bible is recorded in Genesis 3. The record of Adam and Eve’s disobedience illustrates what temptation to sin is, and what happens when we give into it. Temptation is used by Satan to entice Eve to sin against God’s express command not to eat of the tree in the midst of the garden. Everything necessary had been provided by God for the benefit of Adam and Eve. He planted the garden of Eden and established a unique relationship with the humans He had created. Then Satan questioned the authority of God; “Has God said?”

It is important to understand this fundamental issue of

obedience – to God’s will or to our own. When we succumb to temptation, the results can be devastating both for ourselves and for those near us. When we overcome temptation, we glorify God, grow stronger in faith, and are a blessing to others.

*Obedience – to
God’s will or to
our own?*

Eve's first mistake was to add to what God had said: "God has said, 'You shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die'" (v.3). God said nothing about touching the tree, only of not eating its fruit. How often do we erect greater barriers than God makes in a vain attempt to protect ourselves, rather than simply relying upon what God has said and going no further! The Bible closes on a solemn warning not to add or take away from the book's prophecy (Revelation 22:18-19). That is a principle which applies consistently to the word of God.

In Eden, Satan first questioned God's word, then contradicted it. "You will not surely die." Doubt was placed in the mind and heart of Eve, and also the promise of a greater experience: "You will be like God". With this possibility presented to her, Eve began to see the fruit in a different light – not as something dangerous but desirable. "So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate" (v.6). She moved away from the importance of doing what God had said, to seeing the forbidden fruit as a means to a greater existence. She was attracted to it – body (as food), soul (as pleasant) and spirit (to give wisdom). Then she took the tragic step and ate. Temptation ran its full course and sin entered the world. The step she took destroyed her spiritual state, then that of Adam. Sin never confines its pain to those who commit it.

The temptation of Christ

The temptation of Christ is a story, not of the serpent entering a beautiful garden to destroy man's relationship with God, but rather of the Son of God, led by the Spirit,

entering a hostile desert to begin the work of destroying Satan's power. Eve, in spite of enjoying the many blessings of God, was quickly diverted from obedience to the word of God. Jesus, hungry and isolated in a desolate wilderness, confounded the power of Satan by total obedience to God's word!

In Eden, Satan's tactic was, "Has God said?" In the desert, it is similar: "If you are the Son of God..." (Matthew 4:3). Satan always attempts to instil doubt into the minds of the people of God. First, he presses Jesus to command stones to become bread to prove He is the Son of God. Jesus demonstrates that He is the Son of God by His obedience to "every word of God", not by the miraculous fulfilment of His own physical needs.

Afterwards, Satan takes Jesus up to Jerusalem and sets Him on a pinnacle of the temple. Again, Satan casts doubt upon Jesus being the Son of God and presents the opportunity to prove it by a dramatic act, twisting Scripture to support his case. The Lord would not be goaded into drawing attention to Himself by spectacular means, but proves who He is by His understanding of the true nature of God's word.

Finally, the devil takes Him up on a high mountain and, abandoning Scripture, offers Jesus the kingdoms of the world in return for His worship. Jesus remains totally faithful to God's word and dismisses Satan with the words, "You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve". Satan left the Saviour and angels came to minister to Him. This marvellous victory of Jesus over Satan at the beginning of His ministry looks on to His complete victory

through His death, resurrection and ascension.

Victory over temptation

The victory of Christ involves all His people. He wants us to have victory over temptation and the power of sin. John warns us not to love the world (1 John 2:15). He describes all that is in the world – the lust of the flesh (the body), the lust of the eyes (the soul), and the pride of life (the spirit). These are the three great areas of temptation which defeated Eve in the garden and which Christ overcame in the desert. The Lord expects His people to overcome in these same three areas of temptation.

John adds, "And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides for ever" (v.17). The emphasis is clear. Adam and Eve failed in doing God's will, but the last Adam, Jesus, completely fulfilled God's will and now His people have the power to do the same! That power depends on their obedience to God's word. "...the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the wicked one" (v.14).

The way to overcome temptation is to apply and obey God's word to every circumstance. But how does this work in practice? What do I do when I am tempted to steal, cheat, or lie? How do I deal with the threat of being unfaithful or immoral in my life? How do I overcome the temptations of a materialistic age? How do I escape from the very incidents which more and more confront Christians in a world full of moral and spiritual dangers?

Three things are very important: avoiding temptation; running away from temptation; and resisting temptation.

Avoiding temptation

"If you don't want the devil to tempt you with forbidden fruit, you had better keep out of his orchard" is helpful advice. If a Christian is tempted by alcohol, then the pub is not the place to be. One of the first things done in a drug rehabilitation programme is to distance the drug user from the drug supply. This makes sense. It is argued that the Lord Jesus visited all kinds of places and Christians should be able to do the same. But He visited those places with the express purpose and ability to seek and save those who were lost. There are Christians who are gifted and called to go into the most difficult places to win souls for Christ. But this is entirely different from Christians placing themselves in social situations where they endanger their spiritual welfare.

This is particularly a problem when we become idle or apathetic. King David's adultery with Bathsheba was the result of his idleness. He had stopped going to war and was letting others fight the battles he had once so valiantly won. As he walked about his palace, doing nothing, he saw Bathsheba bathing. One thing led to another. The consequences of the king's sin was the death of Bathsheba's brave husband, civil war in Israel, and the death of David's son, Absalom. Had David been with his army, he would not have fallen prey to temptation. He was in the wrong place. Do not make the same mistake!

Running away from temptation

There are times when temptation comes head on and unexpectedly. Joseph experienced this when he was repeatedly accosted by Potiphar's wife. In the end, Joseph takes the only course open to him – he runs away. The Bible is very positive about 'running away': "But you, O man of God, *flee* these things and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness" (1 Timothy 6:11). Paul emphasises the importance of running away from spiritual dangers and the need to pursue things of spiritual value. This is a mind-set which he writes about in Philippians 4:8: "Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report...meditate on these things."

By occupying ourselves with good things, there is little space for bad things. Do not be afraid of running away from the temptation of books, magazines, TV programmes, videos and Internet sites designed to corrupt the mind and consequently the behaviour. Take Paul's advice in Romans 12:2: "...be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God."

Resisting temptation

"...your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith..."(1 Peter 5:8-9). Resisting temptation is not easy but it is rewarding. Martin Luther wrote, "My temptations have been my masters in divinity".

One of the secrets of resisting temptation and the devil is faith – the belief that "He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world" (1 John 4:4). So often we give in to temptation meekly because we think that we are not strong enough to resist. We are not, but the Spirit of God is! The struggle is one of having faith in the Spirit's power to overcome our sinful nature's response to temptation.



The Lord Jesus stressed the importance of watching and praying: "Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matthew 26:41). Watching has the idea of anticipation. If you see temptation coming, you can take action to avoid it. Prayer is essential to all Christian activity and especially in relation to temptation. "Do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one" (Matthew 6:13).

Temptation is something which has to be endured in the sense of fighting against it and not being overcome by it. We should not attribute temptation to God who can neither be tempted nor does He tempt anyone (James 1:12-17). Satan tempts the people of God in order to destroy their faith. God tests our faith to make it stronger. God never appeals to our fallen nature to tempt us into sin – that is the

work of Satan. But God may allow difficulties and problems into our lives. These test our faith and increase it.

Specific temptations

There are, of course, specific temptations. The issue of temptation in relation to sexual matters is addressed in 1 Corinthians 7:2-5. Paul teaches that, for the Christian, sexual intercourse is confined to men and women within the marriage relationship. He also teaches that, in our marriages, we should be sensitive to each other in regard to our sexual needs and not create situations which may tempt our husbands or wives to look for sexual satisfaction outside of marriage. Our demonstration of our love to each other works to protect us from temptation.

Another specific and equally up to date temptation is materialism. Paul warns against this in 1 Timothy 6:6-10. Read the verses. Notice it is the desire to be rich which is highlighted. The pursuit of riches tends to draw the believer away from the things of God and to become absorbed by career, possessions and the esteem wealth appears to promise. The Lord was very direct: "You cannot serve God and Mammon (Money)" (Matthew 6:24).

The whole concept of contentment is alien to our society which has become obsessed with the 'Me' factor. For the Christian, "godliness with contentment" should be of greater value. This is assured by investing in our relationships with the Lord, our families and the people of God. We keep our perspective on material things by applying God's principles of living within our means, not envying others, and being cheerful givers. Epicurus said, "Wealth consists not in having great possessions but in having few wants".

Blessing through temptation

Overcoming temptation has beneficial effects in our spiritual lives. The knowledge that God does not allow us to face temptation which we cannot overcome should keep us humble and reassure us (1 Corinthians 10:12-14). Succumbing to temptation is our responsibility; overcoming it makes us stronger Christians.

Knowing what it is like to be tempted should give us a gentler character and enable us to help those in spiritual difficulty (Galatians 6:1). Paul had a genuine concern for those he felt were in danger of being tempted away from the truth he had taught them. He writes to the Thessalonians about this concern: "For this reason, when I could no longer endure it, I sent to know your faith, lest by some means the tempter had tempted you, and our labour might be in vain" (1 Thessalonians 3:5).

Temptation also enables us to experience the priestly character of the Lord Jesus. Christ, our High Priest, is presented as One who understands and helps us when we are tempted (Hebrews 2:17-18; 4:15-16). There was nothing in Jesus, as there is in our fallen nature, which could be drawn away to sin. He is God and cannot be tempted in that sense. His Manhood was entirely consistent with His divine nature. But the temptations He passed through were a cause of suffering in themselves. As One who so suffered, He is able to sympathise with His people in their struggles against sin and is able to restore them if they do sin.

We need to make sure that, like the coach driver, we stay as far away as possible from temptation's edge. When it does arise, let our attitude be that of John Bunyan: "Temptation provokes me to look upward to God".

*Temptation
provokes me to look upward to God*

Eternal Life

Part 2. Eternal life in the New Testament

Donald Davison

"These are written that you may believe...and that believing you may have life through his name" (John 20:31). Enjoy the wonder of the life that has been given to us as you read this article. Take time to read carefully all the Scripture references.

Introduction

The thought of never dying upon earth, which we considered in our studies in Part 1 on the Old Testament, is carried over into the New Testament in the Gospels. When the ruler asked the Lord, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" (Luke 18:18), he was not thinking of eternal life in heaven, but of living for ever upon earth. The law system of things was still in existence during the Lord's lifetime, though it was empty, vain and a sham because of the unbelief of the nation. Christianity proper, as we know, did not commence until Acts 2.

The time of the Lord's life upon earth was a transitional time between law and grace. We get, therefore, throughout the Gospels, particularly the synoptic Gospels, a mixture of the old law system and the new system of grace which was about to be introduced after the rejection

and crucifixion of the Lord. The Lord Himself said, "The law and the prophets were until John" (Luke 16:16) showing that, although the life of John the Baptist is set out in the New Testament, he was the last of the Old Testament prophets.

The Gospel of John and the epistles treat the subject of eternal life differently. Consequent upon the revelation of the Son of God and the gift of the Holy Spirit forming the Church, there is now a new company upon earth, "partakers of the heavenly calling" (Hebrews 3:1). This new company is in contrast to Israel of old whose calling was earthly. It is to the heavenly aspect of eternal life that we now turn.

There is a very discernible and notable difference in the way that eternal life is spoken about in the Gospel of John. Eternal life as a present possession through faith in the Son of God is part of

what is presented in this Gospel (20:30,31). Linked to this, the knowledge of divine Persons is the essence of eternal life, as we shall see. Eternal, or everlasting, life is mentioned 17 times in John's Gospel and 36 times in the New Testament. Both John and Paul write about eternal life. Broadly speaking, John speaks of it as a present possession (e.g. 5:24), whereas Paul treats of it as that which lies in the future. There are, however, exceptions to this broad generalisation: e.g. John 12:25 gives a 'future' aspect and 1 Timothy 6:12 a 'present' aspect.

Many questions can be, and are, asked about this theme, viz.: Who has eternal life? How is it obtained? Do we possess it now or is it for the future only? Has it been seen in this world? What does it consist of? What effect should it have on our present lives? We shall try to answer these and other questions under a series of headings and listings of the relevant scriptures. The reader is encouraged to take time to look up and consider these scriptures.

Eternal life and divine Persons

- ✿ It is the gift of God (Romans 6:23; 1 John 5:11).
- ✿ The Son is the Giver of it to those given to Him by the Father (John 10:28; 17:2).
- ✿ The Holy Spirit is the power of the new life (Romans 8:2).
- ✿ Eternal life was with the Father (1 John 1:3).
- ✿ It was manifested (made apparent) upon earth in the Lord Jesus and seen by the apostles and others (1 John 1:3).

- ✿ It was in the mind of God and promised before the world began (Titus 1:2).
- ✿ It is in Christ Jesus (2 Timothy 1:1).
- ✿ "This life is in his Son" (1 John 5:11).
- ✿ "He is the true God, and eternal life" (1 John 5:20).
- ✿ The Father's commandment is "life everlasting" (John 12:50).
- ✿ Given by the Son, it is a "well of water springing up into everlasting life" (John 4:14).
- ✿ The Lord's words contain the truth concerning eternal life (John 6:68).
- ✿ Eternal life is the reward at the end of a faithful life (John 12:25).

*He is the true
God, and
eternal life*

As can be seen, these subjects are deep and wide-ranging. In any one verse, both the divine side, as well as the human side, may be found. We cannot confine such a subject to a watertight compartment else, like new wine in old bottles, it will burst out (Matthew 9:17).

Eternal life from the human side

- ✿ It is obtained by believing (John 3:15,16).
- ✿ It is the opposite of perishing (John 3:15,16).

- ❖ The Son of man must be lifted up so that we might have it through believing (John 3:14,15).
- ❖ “He that hath the Son hath life” (1 John 5:12).
- ❖ It is a known possession of those who believe on the name of the Son of God (1 John 5:13).
- ❖ It is the believer’s eternal security (John 10:28,29).
- ❖ It consists in the knowledge of the Father and the Son (John 17:3).
- ❖ It is the food for our souls given by the Son (John 6:27).
- ❖ We eat (appropriate by faith) Christ as the living Bread to obtain life (John 6:51-53).
- ❖ We also eat (appropriate Him) daily to sustain our new life (John 6:54-57).
- ❖ It is a present possession through faith (John 3:36; 5:24).
- ❖ Freed from sin and being now servants of God, we have in prospect “the end everlasting life” (Romans 6:22).
- ❖ It is the reward for living a Spirit filled and controlled life (Galatians 6:8).
- ❖ It is an object to lay hold upon by faith (1 Timothy 6:12,19).
- ❖ We are justified and made heirs according to “the hope of eternal life” (Titus 3:7).
- ❖ We look to receive it at the coming of the Lord (Jude 21).

Eternal life lived upon earth

Life, and particularly eternal life, is an abstract principle. Yet that principle of

eternal life has been revealed, and lived out upon earth in bodily form in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ: “The life was manifested (rendered apparent)” for all to see (1 John 1:2). Eternal life in this world – heard, seen, looked upon and handled! Audible, visible, tangible and understandable! Lived, and living, in perfection amongst men! Marvellous and wonderful thoughts!

That eternal life was “with the Father” (1 John 1:2) in eternity, prior to the incarnation of the Son who brought it into evidence at His coming into the world. The possession of this life brings us into relationship and fellowship with the Father and the Son. “Truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:3). The expression, “fellowship with the Father and with His Son” could be regarded as a scriptural definition of heaven – pure, uninterrupted, perpetual, eternal fellowship in light, life, love and glory with divine Persons throughout eternity. What a wonderful thought and what a wonderful prospect! It is our privilege now to have the light of these things in our souls and to enter already into the enjoyment and appreciation of them under the influence and power of the Holy Spirit.

Eternal life and the knowledge of the Father and the Son

The Lord’s words in prayer to the Father just before the cross were, “And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent” (John 17:3). So knowledge of the Father and the Son constitutes eternal life – really knowing, appreciating, grasping the meaning of what is being conveyed in this knowledge

and revelation. We cannot, of course, understand it entirely, but we can grasp the concept and realise the import of what that knowledge conveys.

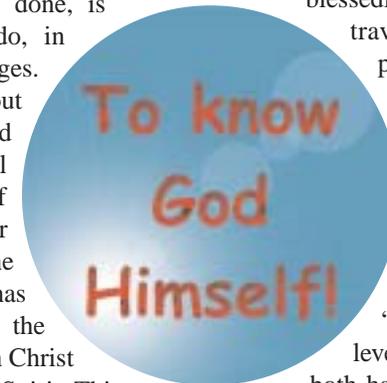
What does it convey? Of what does it consist? “That they might know Thee, i.e. the Father”. That knowledge indicates a relationship between the persons knowing i.e. ourselves, and the Person known i.e. the Father as the only true God. We are brought by faith into a place of nearness, favour and relationship, on intimate terms with God as our Father. There is no barrier, hindrance or distance between our souls and Himself – “For in the person of His Son, we are as near as He”, as the hymn puts it.

Our God is “the only true (genuine) God.” Eternal life is to know God in all that He is, in all that He has done, is doing, and will yet do, in Christ throughout all ages. Not only to know about God, but to know God Himself! To know all that can be known of and about Him by our finite minds! God in the fullness of His being has been made known in the revelation of Himself in Christ – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This knowledge of the unity and plurality of the Godhead was first made known at the baptism of the Lord (Matthew 3:16,17) and developed in its intimacy by John in his Gospel and epistles. No saint in Old Testament times was able to enter into such blessed knowledge. What a privilege is ours!

But the verse goes on to say, “know...Jesus Christ whom thou hast

sent” – to know personally, intimately, deeply our Lord Jesus Christ as the sent One of the Father. Paul illustrates this in his words, “That I might know him, and the power of his resurrection” (Philippians 3:10). Through the help of the Holy Spirit we can appreciate the Lord Jesus as the loved One, and the sent One, of the Father; we can appreciate His preciousness to the Father; we can appreciate His preciousness in Himself and His preciousness to us (see 1 Peter 2:4-7). This is life, real life, eternal life!

We sometimes speak of quantity and quality. In relation to eternal life, when we first come to Christ perhaps the thought of quantity is uppermost in our minds – that in possessing eternal life we shall never die but live for ever with the Lord. This is blessedly true. However, as we travel along our Christian pathways, we begin to see that the quality, or type, of life is of equal, if not of more, importance than its duration. There are conditions attached to all life. We speak of having a ‘good life’ or a ‘bad life’. On the natural level, a prince and a beggar both have part in life upon earth, but in what vastly different circumstances and conditions – one in a palace, and one in a gutter! What shall we say about eternal life and the conditions attaching to it? For us, as we have seen, eternal life consists in the knowledge of the Father and the Son in known and enjoyed holy conditions of life, light, love and glory. What marvellous and wonderful thoughts! By faith, as having eternal life, we are “in the



light” and the love of God dwells “in us”, made good to us in the power of the indwelling Spirit of God. Having the Holy Spirit within as the Unction, we have the capacity to know, understand, enter into, and enjoy the revealed truth of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We can understand a little of their unique relationship together and of our relationship to, and with, them by faith and grace.

In the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, we have been brought into a unique and privileged relationship as His brethren. His words to Mary Magdalene were, “I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God” (John 20:17). How wonderful to know that God is our Father, in all the nearness and intimacy of what term of relationship means! But so intimate a place of relationship and privilege should guard us against any undue familiarity when we address the Father and the Son in prayer. We must also remember that our Father is our God: “He is thy Lord; and worship thou him” (Psalm 45:11).

“Our fellowship, (or communion), is with the Father, and with his Son, Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:3). We enter into the enjoyment of this communion in the power of the Holy Spirit. As our hearts and minds are engaged with divine Persons - their wonder, their glory, their power, their love – our souls are nourished and built up in divine realities. Ours is the inestimable privilege of enjoying the company and companionship of divine Persons moment by moment in our daily lives. If, on earth, there is one thing greater than being saved, it is to enjoy the company of the One who saved us as we journey on our way to glory. As saints of God, we go

through this world as separate from it, in the light of another world, the Father’s world, and in blessed communion with the Father and the Son. This is life eternal!

The last words of John’s first epistle are, “He is the true God and eternal life” (JND trans.). This unique statement delineates for us His essential deity as well as He Himself being the embodiment, substance and expression of eternal life.

It is often remarked that we have to live with someone really to know them. As Christians, we need to ask ourselves, “With whom do we live day by day?” In our waking moments, what do we think about, dwell upon? What is the bent of our lives? Do we really “meditate on these things” (1 Timothy 4:15)? The Lord asked the two disciples who left John the Baptist to follow Him, “What seek ye?” They answered, “Master, where dwellest thou?” and received the beautiful reply, “Come and see”. They spent a whole day in the company of the Son of God (John 1:37-40). Do we know anything of this? Here is ‘quality time’, par excellence, day by day, in the company of, the knowledge of, and communion in our souls with, the Father and the Son.

Conclusion

May these considerations help us to:

- ✿ Search the Scriptures daily whether these things be so (Acts 17:11)
- ✿ Enter more deeply into these things
- ✿ Encourage us to a closer walk with Christ
- ✿ Enjoy a more intimate daily association and communion with our adorable Lord!

Lessons from Isaiah ch.40 for Today

Part 1. vv.1-2

Mark Davison

The opening words of Isaiah 40 are reminiscent of the Lord’s message to His disciples in the opening words of John 14: “Let not your heart be troubled”. Those words of Jesus still bring their own comfort to His people. So the words of Isaiah, though addressed primarily to his fellow Jews, still bring their unique comfort and insight into the heart of God.

Introduction

The message of the prophet, Isaiah, principally concerned the place of the Jews in the world of his day. After the death of Solomon, nearly 200 years before Isaiah began his work, the kingdom of Israel had been divided into the northern kingdom, Israel, and the southern kingdom, Judah. Isaiah prophesied both to Israel and to Judah.

Isaiah makes it quite clear that the whole world is in God’s control. He shows the people of God that, if they sin and turn their backs on God, He will punish them. At no time, however, do they cease to be His special people and, if they turn back to God in repentance, He will receive them.

Timeline

A brief glance at the timeline of this period in Israel’s history will help. The dates are only approximate.

- 930B.C. Kingdom split after the death of Solomon
- 722B.C. Northern kingdom taken into captivity by the Assyrians

597B.C. Nebuchadnezzar’s 1st capture of Jerusalem

587B.C. Nebuchadnezzar’s 2nd capture of Jerusalem; the Temple destroyed and the Jews deported

530B.C. 1st exiles return to Jerusalem under Zerubbabel (Ezra 1-6)

450B.C. Remaining exiles, including Ezra and Nehemiah, return (Ezra 7-10, Nehemiah)

Isaiah prophesied for some 60 years, from about 740-680B.C.

Exile

The story of the invasion and eventual overthrow of Jerusalem can be read in 2 Kings 24-25. Whilst we see there that it was carried out by the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, Scripture makes it clear that it was permitted by the Lord: “...because of the sins of Manasseh and all he had done, including the shedding of innocent blood... the LORD was not willing to forgive” (2 Kings 24:3). Manasseh had reigned many years earlier, but God had not forgotten his wickedness, and saw that it must be punished: “For the LORD is a God of justice” (Isaiah 30:18).

In Manasseh's sin, we see a solemn warning for events in the world even today. In many places, in bitter conflicts and acts of terrorism, innocent blood is spilt. Those responsible will have to give account for this to a just God in a day to come.

Yet not just Manasseh, but the whole nation was guilty in the sight of God: "The LORD your God decreed this disaster for this place. And now the LORD has brought it about; he has done just as he said he would. All this happened because you people sinned against the LORD and did not obey him" (Jeremiah 40:2-3).

When Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem, he left the poorest of the Jews behind, but carried off the majority to exile in Babylon – among them, Daniel and his friends. This was predicted by Isaiah (39:5-7), at least 90 years before it occurred. No one returned to Jerusalem for at least 70 years, as prophesied by Jeremiah (29:10).

Psalm 137

Chapters 40-55 of Isaiah were written to comfort the faithful ones, sometimes known as the remnant, while they endured the years of exile. This is clearly stated in 40:1: "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God".

And what comfort they needed! We get a clear impression of their distress in



Psalm 137, where they cry out in despair to God. They wept as they remembered Zion (Jerusalem). The faith which they followed was very material, rooted in the worship of God at the temple in Jerusalem. There they had

observed, and taken part in, the rituals of sacrifice and the various feasts. Because of this, Jerusalem was vitally important to them; they had a burning passion for their homeland. So when they were taunted for a song (v.4), they could not sing for their distress. Neither would they sing, and

allow the songs so important to them to be mocked. This is a picture of a people far away from God, and without a song. We sometimes get depressed and, in adverse circumstances, lose sight of the strength which God gives to us and so we have no song. But what a contrast with the Lord Jesus! Even on the night before He went to the cross, and knowing all that was to happen to Him in the next few hours, He was able to sing a hymn (Matthew 26:30). Was it that He knew the reality of Nehemiah's words, "The joy of the LORD is [My] strength" (8:10)? He was, therefore, able to sing despite His circumstances.

The psalm shows us the distress felt by the people, distress which had come upon them because of their sin. Such distress can be a positive thing, because God can work with those who recognise

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their sinful condition. Such are thrown back upon the mercy of God, and they call out to Him, "Remember, O LORD ..." (v.7).

The remaining part of the psalm is a call for vengeance to be rained down upon their enemies. Jeremiah shows us that Babylon was certainly going to suffer punishment at the hand of God for their treatment of His people (51:56). The New Testament opens out the principle of justice (Romans 2:5 ff.). The death of Jesus has saved us from it. It is not now for us to call for judgment, but rather to pray that our enemies might repent and turn to God. Jesus Himself gave us this example on the cross (Luke 23:34); Stephen followed it when he was being stoned to death (Acts 7:60).

Verse 1

"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God" (v.1).

Three voices speak in the first few verses of Isaiah 40 (vv.3,6,9). We might call them heralds since they bring the message of God to His people. A good summary of that message is found in 61:1, but here, in v.1, we might say that they are commissioned to bring comfort to the people. The underlying sense of these words is one of wooing the people. A double comfort is spoken.

Notice that God still refers to them as 'My people'. That fact has never

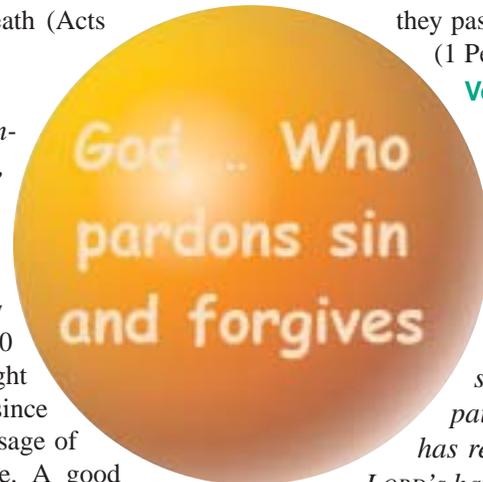
changed. We have a beautiful picture of the heart of the Father-God displayed to His beloved children. The words 'says your God' literally mean 'keeps saying your God', for God cannot forget His children (49:15). He knows how they have suffered. He knows how Jerusalem has been ruined. But He knows, too, that comfort will follow the suffering (Jeremiah 29:10-14).

We can go further than this, for we know that our Saviour and Lord has Himself suffered in this world. He can enter into our feelings when we suffer (Hebrews 4:15). This should be an assurance to us when we go through testing times (2 Corinthians 1:3-5). So we should be able, in turn, to comfort others as they pass through such trials (1 Peter 1:6ff.).

Verse 2

"Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins" (v.2).

V.2 literally begins, 'Speak to the heart'. It is, again, an appeal of love, wooing the people back, seeking to persuade them that their period of duress (A.V. 'warfare', lit. 'hard service') has been completed and that they have paid equal (A.V. 'double', lit. 'equal to') for all their



sins. The scene is rather like that of a heavenly court which, having passed sentence and seen it executed, now pronounces the guilty party clear of blame.

This verse emphasises again that the hardship endured has been only on account of their own sin, and need not have been but for that. They had harvested their own sowing, but now their punishment has been accepted by God as sufficient. Micah tells us, "Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgressions of the remnant of his inheritance?" (7:18). Such a God is ours also!"

And yet, there are two consequences of sin. One is that justice must be done in the appropriate punishment – they had served that. The second is the natural effect of the sin. If an alcoholic person commits a criminal offence whilst under the influence of drink, he may be punished by a period of imprisonment. But when he is released, he must still face up to the natural effects of his addiction – the damage to his own health, the detrimental impact upon his family and friends, etc. So it was with the Jews. They were forgiven by God, but Jerusalem still lay in ruins. Not until Zerubbabel (530B.C.), and later Ezra and Nehemiah returned (450B.C.), did the rebuilding work really begin.

So how would God comfort these people in exile? Look at the following verses:

1. v.2 – He tells them that their sorrows will end
2. vv.3,4 – He tells them that all obstacles will be removed
3. v.8 – He reminds them that the word of God stands for ever
4. vv.11ff. – He shows them that the God of creation is also the One who cares for them as a shepherd for his sheep.

In later articles, we will look at these verses and see in them far greater significance than the Jews of the exile could possibly see. But what comfort these things ought to have brought to them in their distress!

Finally, read Psalm 126, and see the remarkable contrast in the hearts of these people. Where before (in Psalm 137), they had been in the enemies' land, now they are back in Zion! Where there had been no joy, no singing, now they can say, "Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy" (v.2). They have learned the bitter lessons through many tears, but now they can rejoice in the greatness of God's power working for their blessing.

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*John Allen Weston,
Greenwich, London.*

Cedar

Cedrus Libani



Hebrew: 'Erez = Firmness, from the tenacity of its roots. 'Araz = Made of cedar.

Leviticus 14:4 + sixty-eight other references.

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Isaiah 50

The Lord GOD gave to Thee
Lips that were filled with grace.
The weary were encouraged
As they did seek Thy face.

And morning by new morning
He wakened up Thine ear.
May we be obedient –
Through anguish and through fear.

Thy back was lashed to shreds,
And hair plucked off Thy cheek.
If we are called to suffer
May we be just as meek.

To shame Thy face was set,
Men cruelly spat on Thee.
In sharing Thy reproach,
Oh, let us peaceful be!

O Christ, Thou ever art
The Servant bound by love.
Help us to serve like Thee,
Till in Thy house above.

George Stevens