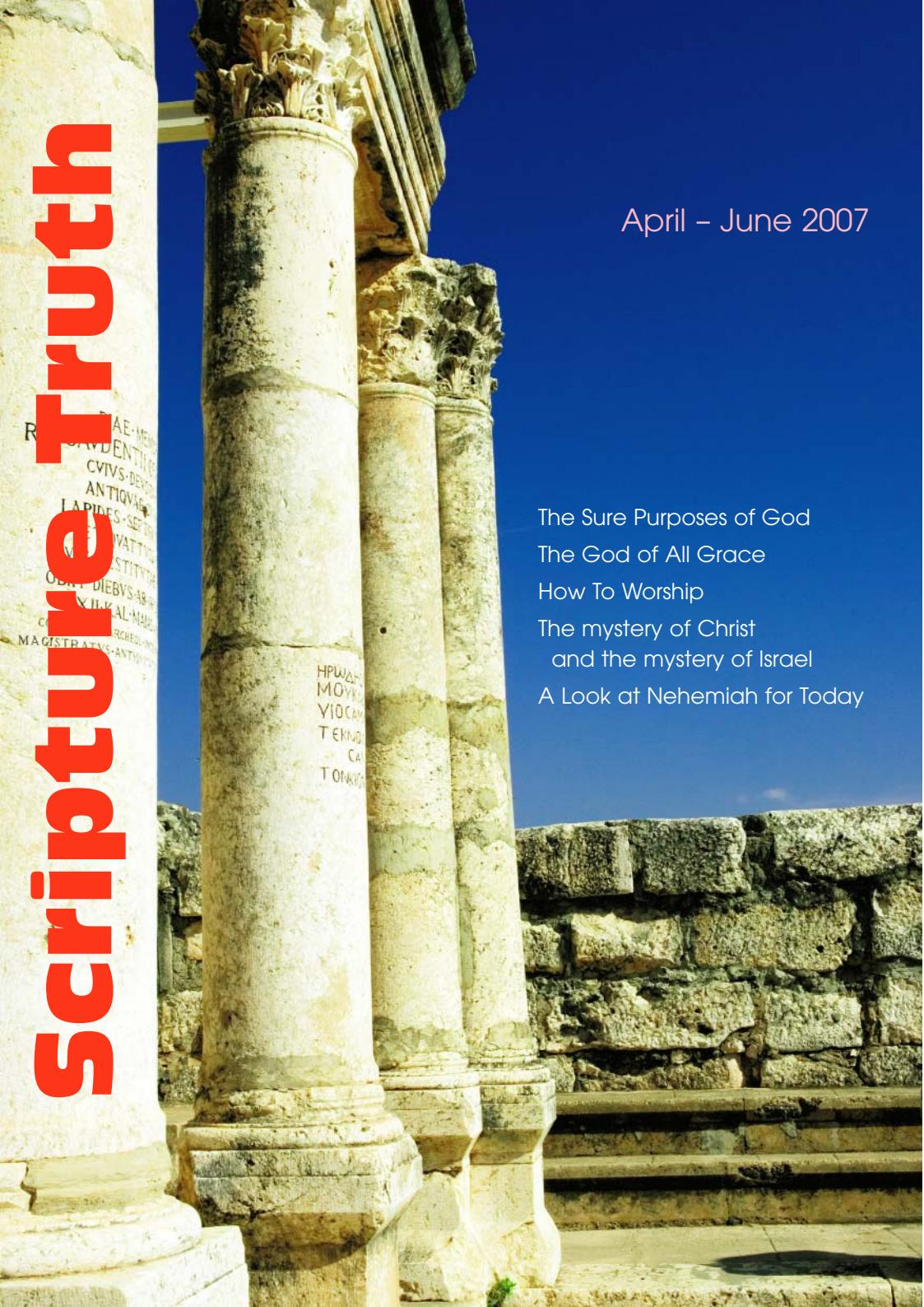


ScriptureTruth

April – June 2007

The Sure Purposes of God
The God of All Grace
How To Worship
The mystery of Christ
and the mystery of Israel
A Look at Nehemiah for Today



SCRIPTURE TRUTH

Editor: Theo Balderston

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How to...

Part 3: How to Worship

Gordon Hughes

The deep but challenging simplicity of worshipping “in spirit and in truth” is possibly the most important aspect of our Christian life. It is explored in this article, which originated as a talk on the Truth for Today programme for London’s Premier Radio (www.truthfortoday.org.uk).

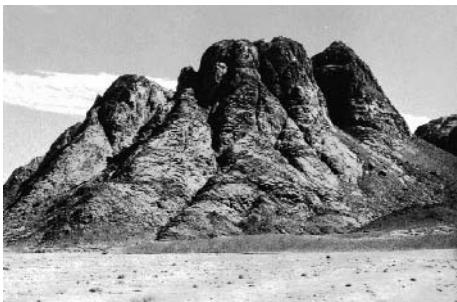
The woman at Sychar's well

Have you ever been for a long walk under a hot sun? What bliss to be able to sit down and quench your thirst! Thirst and worship belong intimately together in one of the most important conversations of the Bible. It took place between the Lord Jesus, when He was tired and thirsty after a long walk under the noonday sun, and an ostracised Samaritan woman who had come to the well of Sychar to fill her waterpot. The conversation ultimately was about worship, and is found in the Gospel of John, chapter 4. Worship is as important as studying the Bible and prayer – previous topics in this series – but perhaps also more difficult. Consequently worship, sometimes, is the most neglected.

In the third chapter of John’s Gospel, Jesus had had to speak to Nicodemus, one of the Jews’ respected spiritual leaders, about his need for new birth, that is, for a totally new life in Christ. But to this evidently sinful, immoral woman Jesus spoke about worship! We might have thought that Nicodemus should have been told about worship and the Samaritan woman about the need for a new beginning. But Jesus was absolutely right, as always! Nicodemus needed to be reminded that his self-righteousness was just not good enough for God. The Samaritan woman, probably all too painfully aware of her sinful condition, needed to be assured that God was looking for worship, even from the likes of her! That should encourage all of us today. Whatever our needs and shortcomings, God has made a way for us through the work of the Lord Jesus at Calvary to be able to worship Him. We should not be put off by the difficulties of the subject. Our worship really matters to God!

What is worship?

The dictionary tells us that one of the meanings of “-ship”, used as a suffix at the end of a word, is “status, office, or honour” – as in “authorship” or “lordship.” Our English word “worship” derives essentially from “worth-ship” and so involves a recognition of the essential worth of the one worshipped. Thus it might be said of a young man, very much in love with his beloved, “He worships the ground she



Mount Sinai

walks on.” Sadly, the devotion offered to the superstars of sport and pop by their devotees is tantamount to worship.

That leads us then to our next question:
Whom should we worship?

The Bible makes it very clear that God alone is to be worshipped. So the first of the Ten Commandments given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai is, “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3).

But before Moses could come down from the mountain to the camp of the Israelites, they had already broken that commandment by making a golden calf and worshipping it. In his distress, Moses broke the two tablets of stone on which the commandments had been written (32:1-20). He was later asked by God to return and receive two new tablets of commandments. God’s word to him then was even more specific: “[Y]ou shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is jealous, is a jealous God” (34:14). We should just note in passing, that human jealousy is often associated with hatred and anger because we are sinners. But here, God uses the word “jealous” in its best sense, to mean “a deep feeling of love that will brook no rival.”

The Lord Jesus Himself reinforced this important message, that worship belongs to God alone. In the wilderness, Satan tempted Jesus to worship him, promising Jesus all the kingdoms of the world if He would do so. Jesus’ answer was immediate: “Away with you, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve’” (Matthew 4:10).

But though the Lord Jesus said that worship was due to God alone, He Himself was worshipped. In the first mention of “worship” in the New Testament we read, “And when they had come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down and worshipped him” (Matthew 2:11). He was “Immanuel, which is translated, ‘God with us’” (1:23). God the Son is worthy of equal honours with God the Father (John 5:23).

Why should we worship?

One simple answer would be that we are commanded to do so: “[H]e is your Lord, worship Him” (Psalm 45:11). But worship only as an act of enforced obedience would be a very poor thing. We may be moved by a beautiful sunset or by an awe-inspiring view of snow-covered mountains to worship God as Creator. We have a deep sense of His worth as the One who brought all these things into being. But the knowledge of the Lord Jesus as my Saviour, the One who died for my sins

at Calvary, is surely the strongest motive of all to lead me to worship Him – to acknowledge His *supreme worth*.

Just a brief glance at Matthew's Gospel is sufficient to show how many and varied were the people who were moved to worship Christ. The wise men, as already mentioned, "worshipped him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh." The deep sense of His worth that filled their hearts was evidenced by the very costly gifts they presented to the Christ Child. Later we read, "And behold, a leper came and worshipped Him, saying, 'Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean'" (8:2). That poor leper was already convinced that Jesus was *able* to do for him what no other had been able to do. He learned that day that Jesus was also more than *willing* to heal him in his need.

Jairus, a ruler of the synagogue, recognised that same power that was in the Lord Jesus: "[B]ehold a ruler came and worshipped him, saying, 'My daughter has just died, but come and lay your hand on her and she will live'" (9:18). One night, Jesus came walking on the water to aid His disciples, caught in a storm on Lake Galilee. As He stilled the raging storm, that was no doubt raging in their own hearts as well, we read, "Then those who were in the boat came and worshipped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God'" (14:33). Even a poor Canaanite woman, outside the fold of Israel, came to Jesus. We read, "Then she came and worshipped him, saying, 'Lord, help me!'" (15:25). Matthew's Gospel ends on that same note of worship, this time to Christ in resurrection: "And as [the women] went to tell his disciples, behold, Jesus met them, saying, 'Rejoice! And they came and held him by the feet and worshipped him" (28:9; see also verse 17). To use the language of Hebrews 12:1, we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, not only to faith, but also to worship.

Who should worship?

It is remarkable that the revelation regarding worship should be given to an immoral Samaritan, and yet only saved sinners can be true worshippers. However, to reach the Lord's teaching on this vital subject it was first necessary for the woman to make some painful admissions to Him, through which she learned His greatness (John 4:16-19). We have to come as sinners to the cross before we can

*Worship ought to be the instinctive response
of the new life that the Christian has in Christ*

worship; but we also have to “examine ourselves” regarding sin in our lives every time we worship (cp. 1 Corinthians 11:27-28).

How to worship

Our local bookshop stocks a profusion of books on “How to …”! *How to pass your driving test; How to improve your French; How to cook*, etc. But I have not yet seen a book on teaching a baby *How to breathe!* A new-born baby does not need to be told how to breathe. Breathing is an instinctive response of the life in that baby. In the same way, worship ought to be the instinctive response of the new life that the Christian has in Christ, in the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

I have to say that I cringe, sometimes, when I read of “Worship workshops” being arranged – as though I can learn to worship in the same way as I might go to classes to learn car maintenance. It seems that such “worship workshops” are largely concerned with singing hymns. Worship has been described as “the upflow of adoration which rises from a redeemed soul to God” (F.B.Hole). Another has described it as “making much to God of His beloved Son”. Many much-loved and inspiring hymns do not fall into this category. Some are expressions of need, testimonies to help given, blessings wished upon others. Excellent in their place: but they should not be confused with hymns that directly express our adoration of the Father and the Son for Who They are and what They have done.

Jesus was able to speak to the woman at Sychar’s well about worship because He knew that her experience of the transforming grace which He was about to work in her life would lead her to the spiritually instinctive response of worship that we have been speaking about. But first He must teach this woman about the very important changes which He was about to introduce.

Up till that moment, the Jews had worshipped God in the temple on Mount Zion in Jerusalem, worshipping Him as known by His covenant-name to Israel of Jehovah, the self-existent One. (Their Samaritan neighbours, not to be outdone, had set up a rival temple on Mount Gerizim, which the Lord referred to this as “this mountain” (John 4:21).) The temple worship in Jerusalem originated in the instructions that God had given to Moses, and centred on a literal place of worship. At first this was the tabernacle in the wilderness, and subsequently the Jerusalem temple in the land of Israel. Along with the literal place went a system

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of worship based on priests with holy garments, together with visible sacrifices of animals and grain. The majority of the people were excluded from the presence of God. That holy privilege belonged only to the High Priest and even for him only once a year (Leviticus 16:2,29,30). That system had held good for some 1300 years until Christ came.

But Jesus, in the light of His coming death at Calvary, which would remove in one stroke the barrier of sin that separates man from God, speaks to the woman of the profound change which He was about to introduce: “[T]he hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father” (John 4:21). No longer would God be known in the remote way made known at Mount Sinai – as Jehovah, the One who gave the Ten Commandments to Moses. He would be known as Father and worshipped as such by His children, those who had been brought into His family through the death of His Son, Jesus, at Calvary. In the early hours of that first Easter morning, the Lord Jesus announced that new relationship to Mary Magdalene. It was as though that good news could not be kept for a moment longer: “[G]o to my brethren and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, and to my God and your God’” (20:17). Christian worship is a totally different thing from the worship offered by the Israelites to Jehovah. It has at its heart the worship of the Father and the Son.

It is important to recognise the fact that God the Father must be worshipped in the way which He has laid down. It is so easy to think that each of us should worship God in the way in which each of us feels comfortable. But the important question is not “Is it right for me?” but “Is it right for God the Father?” So Jesus went on to say to the woman at the well, “But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth ... God is a Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:23,24). No longer is Christian worship confined to a particular place and to a particular group of people, as in tabernacle and temple days. Christians, whether as individuals or as companies of God’s people, have been brought into the glorious liberty of being free to worship the Father and the Son wherever they are! “In spirit” tells us that Christian worship is not motivated by externals, like buildings,

vestments and sacrifices, but rather proceeds from the heart, as the spirit of the worshipper is moved by the Holy Spirit to worship the Father and the Son. It finds its highest expression, perhaps, when Christians come together to remember the Lord Jesus in His death. Faced with the loaf of bread and the cup of wine, the only material emblems sanctioned by Christ, we are reminded forcibly of the wonder of His giving of Himself for us at Calvary. Our hearts are ready then to burst out in thanksgiving and worship as we consider how the Father has sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world (1 John 4:14). As our human spirits are wrought upon by the Spirit of God, we may have such a deep impression of the greatness of the Father and the Son that human words fail adequately to express that worship. In that case, it may be that silence, rather than a multitude of words, is a more appropriate response.

“In truth” emphasises what we have already said, that Christian worship must proceed in line with the guidelines laid down by Scripture. Sadly, much of what passes for worship in Christendom is simply a “makeover” of Old Testament Jewish ritual and fails completely to recognise the new position before the Father into which we have been brought through the death of the Lord Jesus.

It might be thought that anything I might be able to offer to God the Father in worship is altogether too inconsequential. But Jesus made plain to the woman, “[T]he Father is seeking such to worship him” (John 4:23). In that same lovely way in which the Lord Jesus as the Good Shepherd came seeking the lost sheep – you and me (see Luke 15) – so God the Father is actively seeking your worship and mine! Let us open our hearts in adoration to Him today!

In closing, let me remark that the very first mention of worship in the Bible is found in Genesis 22:5. Abraham had been asked by God to offer up his only son, Isaac, in sacrifice. So we read, “And Abraham said to his young men, ‘Stay here with the donkey; the lad and I will go yonder and worship, and we will come back to you.’” Even should God demand the ultimate sacrifice from Abraham, Abraham was determined to make that costly offering an act of worship.

True Christian worship is also a costly thing. Isaac Watts catches the spirit of it:

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

*God the Father is actively
seeking your worship and mine!*

The God of all Grace

Gordon Kell

Today's world knows much about its rights and little about grace. Christians, saved by grace, should live lives stamped by grace. This article, also from a talk on the Truth for Today radio programme, explains how. It is the final part of a Series with this title.

Introduction

If there is one man in the New Testament who could write about the grace of God, that man is Peter. You might think of Paul, the converted persecutor of Christ's church, as the outstanding recipient of God's grace. But whereas Paul had persecuted the church in ignorance (1 Timothy 1:13), Peter denied the Lord after accompanying Him throughout His ministry. He had witnessed Jesus' most remarkable miracles; had been part of the select group whom Jesus chose to be with Him on special occasions; had walked on water; had seen the glory of Jesus on the mount of transfiguration, and been with Jesus in Gethsemane. And he had confessed Jesus as "the Son of the Living God" (Matthew 16:16). Despite all this, and despite promising to die for his Lord, Peter denied three times that he knew the Saviour who loved him.

But grace is the unmerited favour of God. After the resurrection of Jesus, the angel told the women at the tomb, "tell His disciples – and Peter – that He [Jesus] is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him" (Mark 16:7). It was "the God of all grace" ensuring

immediately that the wayward disciple learned that Jesus was alive. Later, on the beach at Galilee, the Lord Jesus asked Peter, "Simon, [son] of Jonah, do you love me more than these?" (John 21:15). Three times Peter had denied Jesus, and three times he was questioned about his love for Christ. What followed was the amazing grace of the Lord Jesus in not only restoring His beloved disciple but also calling him to the service of a shepherd, to the single-mindedness of a disciple and to the suffering of a martyr.

The resurrected Christ changed the brash, strong-minded fisherman into the gentle shepherd who wrote the letter we know as First Peter. "The God of



all grace” permeates the whole of this letter. In the last chapter, especially, there are five aspects of the grace of God.

The first is spiritual leadership and the grace to shepherd (1 Peter 5:1-4). The next aspect is grace to submit (1 Peter 5:5-7). If grace to submit is a *passive* quality, Peter’s third aspect, namely, the grace to be sound-minded and steadfast, resisting the devil, is challengingly *active* (1 Peter 5:8-9). Then we come to the actual phrase, “the God of all grace,” whose grace for suffering perfects, establishes, strengthens and settles us (1 Peter 5:10). Finally, we come to the “grace in which we stand” (1 Peter 5:11-14).

Grace to shepherd

The grace of God showed itself in Peter’s very words. Outstanding spiritual leader though he was, he did not appeal to his readers on the basis of his apostleship but as “a fellow elder” (1 Peter 5:1). True spiritual leadership is always by example. At the beginning of his discipleship Peter had been called by the Lord Jesus to be an evangelist (Matthew 4:18-19). At the end of John’s Gospel, he is called to be a pastor (John 21:15-17). This involved feeding and caring for the people for whom the Lord died; and there is no higher calling than this. High it may be, but Peter came to understand, through God’s grace, that this work is only effectively accomplished by humility.

Christ had taught His disciples that the greatest amongst them would be those who served. (Luke 22:26). Christ was willing to serve: that willingness should characterize each of us. The Lord’s last recorded words on earth to Peter were, “You follow me” (John 21:22). And now, as a lifelong follower and servant of Christ, Peter appeals to his fellow elders to “shepherd the flock of God.” He adds weight to this appeal by mentioning that he had witnessed the sufferings of Christ. This must have impressed his readers with the solemnity of their task.

The “flock” whom Peter encourages them to shepherd was the one that was “among you” (1 Peter 5:2). He reminds them – and us – that their first responsibility was to the people of God right where they themselves were. He encourages them to serve willingly as overseers. The overseers employed in former times in the north-of-England textile industry had the reputation of hard taskmasters with little compassion for the workers under them. But Peter paints a picture of shepherds who cared for God’s people with tender hearts.

Once I stayed at a friend’s farm. Early one morning he invited me to “look over” his sheep. We went into a large barn, where there must have been about two hundred sheep, to my eyes all identical. But my friend intently studied his flock, then started moving through them. Taking hold of one, he carried it to the side of the barn and



gave it an injection before releasing it again into the flock. Not being a shepherd, I did not know one sheep from another, let alone the state of health of any. My friend *was* a shepherd, and by “overseeing” the flock he could instantly detect which animal needed attention. We need pastors today who have the eyes and heart to see the needs of God’s people and apply the word of God sensitively to their hearts.

In John 10:11 the Lord Jesus is “the Good Shepherd” who died for us, in Hebrews 13:20 “the Great Shepherd” who was raised for us, but in 1 Peter 5:4 “the Chief Shepherd” who rewards faithful pastors at His coming again.

Grace to submit

After writing to the elders, Peter next addresses younger people about the grace to submit (5:5). He points out the importance of their recognizing and accepting the authority of the spiritual leadership. Authority is an important principle in the Bible. It is

important in family life, in work, in society and in the church of God. And then he adds, that this aspect of grace applies to all Christians. All should be submissive to, and show humility toward one another. “The God of all grace” must help us all to demonstrate genuine humility. False humility is the hypocrisy of Uriah Heep, the unpleasant character in Dickens’ *David Copperfield* who was always telling people that he was “ever so humble” whilst deceiving his way through life.

Our world promotes assertiveness and has little sympathy with humility. Contrariwise, Peter writes that “God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (compare Proverbs 3:34). He encourages the people of God to “humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time...” (5:6). “He has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the LORD require of you But to do justly, To love mercy, And to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8)

Peter had learned how the Lord cared for him. Before he had denied Him the Lord had said, “But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to me, strengthen your brethren” (Luke 22:32). The experience had taught Peter to trust God implicitly, with the result that the grace in his heart now led him to write, “Casting all your care upon him, for he cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7). There is nothing we cannot cast

upon the Lord Jesus. When we used to run summer camps for children, my wife would, each morning, collect all the things we needed for the day – towels, flasks, first aid kit, books, etc. – and put them into our green rucksack. Not only was the rucksack full but things were tied to it as well. When we could get no more into it and on it, she put it on my back! There is no burden too big for Jesus to bear; only faith that is too small to cast our burdens on Him (Psalm 55:22).

Grace to be sound minded and steadfast

“A roaring lion” is one of the most vivid descriptions of the devil in the New Testament (1 Peter 5:8). Peter had experienced Satan’s “sifting as wheat,” just as the Lord had foretold (Luke 22:31). He was well aware of Satan’s power to devour the self-confident. But although Satan is powerful, he is not all-powerful. It was the prayers of Christ that had resisted Satan’s attempts to destroy Peter’s faith. We resist Satan by being sound-minded and vigilant. “For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind” (2 Timothy 1:7). It is important that we use our minds to anticipate Satan’s actions. This is what Jesus did: He anticipated Satan’s actions against Peter and then resisted him by prayer. When Satan confronted Jesus at the beginning of His ministry, Jesus overcame him by the word of God. And John writes, “I have written to you, young men, Because you are

strong, and the word of God abides in you, And you have overcome the wicked one” (1 John 2:14). David writes, “Your word I have hidden in my heart, That I might not sin against you” (Psalm 119:11). Peter writes, “Resist him, steadfast in the faith” (1 Peter 5:9). This means: to be dependent not upon ourselves but upon the revealed word of God. 1 John 4: 4 reads, “You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.”

“The God of all grace”

Now we reach “the God of all grace.” Peter traces grace and all its attributes back to God. God has come towards us in grace through the Lord Jesus Christ. “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that you through his poverty might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9). This same grace continues to be supplied each day in the Christian’s life so that we can live for Christ. This life is progressive and ultimately leads to heaven. God has, “called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus.” Peter outlines the progression toward that goal: “...after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle [you]” (1 Peter 5:10).

It helps me to visualize this verse in terms of the maturing of a garden plant. First there is the suffering – the hardening of a plant as it is removed

from its pot and placed in the garden. “The God of all grace” gives us the grace for suffering. Then there is the perfecting. The idea is completion or arrangement – putting the plant in the right place. Then comes the establishment – making sure the plant takes root. It also needs to be strengthened – fed and watered. And finally the settling, wherein it develops, matures and, of course, bears fruit.

God allows suffering in our lives to build us into stronger, not weaker, Christians. He puts us in the right place in the church to fulfil the role He wants us to undertake. The local church is also the place where we establish ourselves, put down roots, where we are spiritually fed through the ministry of God’s word, prayer and fellowship, and where we “settle” so that we can grow, mature, and bear “fruit, more fruit and much fruit” (see John 15:2,8).

Considering the work of God’s grace in the lives of His people makes Peter’s heart overflow with praise: “To him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen” (1 Peter 5:11).

The grace in which we stand

As he closes the letter Peter writes of “the true grace in which [we] stand” (5:12) This is the spiritual state of those who have experienced God’s grace, enabling them to “stand” in the grace so fully described in Ephesians 2:4-9. This grace found us “dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ….

and raised [us] up together, and made [us] sit together in the heavenly [places] in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in [his] kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.” They rest simply in *grace* having saved them, “not of yourselves; [it is] the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.”

In 1 Peter 2:5, the apostle described Christians as living stones being built into a spiritual house. Unlike bricks which start off much the same size and shape, stones are all interestingly individual; yet they still have to be shaped to fit the place assigned to them in the building. Peter’s life had been shaped not just by “grace,” but by “the God of all grace.” God had personally intervened in his life to shape him into the person that would best serve Christ. The shaping was a necessary but sometimes painful process. The same “God of all grace” is working in our lives to shape us by His Spirit and His word into the “living stones” that He wants us to be.

Echoing 1 Corinthians 15:10, John Newton wrote:

I am not what I might be;
I am not what I ought to be;
I am not what I wish to be;
I am not what I hope to be.

But I thank God that I am not what I once was,
And I can say with the great apostle,
“By the grace of God I am what I am.”

*By the grace of God
I am what I am*

The mystery of Christ and the mystery of Israel

Theo Balderston

What is God's purpose for the church? Has He still a purpose for Israel after the cross? This article revisits these important questions.

Two mysteries

The subject of this article is two “mysteries” that seem to be at odds with each other. In Ephesians 3:4,6 Paul wrote of “the mystery of Christ... that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ through the gospel.” And in Romans 11:25-6 he wrote of “this mystery... that hardening in part has happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel shall be saved...” In one the distinction between Jew and Gentile is abolished; in the other it is fundamental. How can both be true?

The mystery of Christ

In Paul’s language, a *mystery* is something hidden in previous ages, but now revealed. “The mystery of Christ” in Ephesians 3:6 was something specially revealed to himself (3:3). It means, literally, that Gentile believers are “with-heirs”, “with-body” and “with-partakers” with Jewish believers. But the key phrase is “in Christ” (many translations have “in Christ Jesus”). This phrase must be considered first.

Because believers are “in Christ”, what is His in virtue of His death, resurrection and ascension, is theirs too. A sense of this is conveyed by other statements of Paul. In Colossians 3:4 he regards it as self-evident, that “When Christ, who is our life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.” So completely are believers already united with Christ as dead, risen and ascended (2:11,13; 3:1), that it would be unthinkable for Him to appear in glory without them appearing in glory with Him. Similarly, in 1 Thessalonians 4:14, it is self-evident to Paul that, if “Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with him those who sleep in Jesus.” And so, too, in Ephesians 3:6 Paul says that the things heavenly and earthly that Christ receives in virtue of His death, resurrection and ascension cannot but be shared with those who now believe in Him (cp. 1:10-11).

“Heirs” takes them *individually* into all that is lavishly described concerning Christ’s universal inheritance in Ephesians 1:10-18 (cp. Romans 8:17). “Body” takes them *collectively* to the stupendous fact that when all things, heavenly and earthly, are put under Christ’s feet, He is made “head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fulness of him who fills all in all” (Ephesians 1:22-23).

Alluding *via* Psalm 8:6 to Genesis 2:18-23, this verse hints at the picture of Eve being brought to Adam in the day of his headship over the earthly creation, and becoming its beneficiary. It is a picture of believing Gentiles, with believing Jews, being brought to Christ as His church and beneficiary of His Headship in the place where He is exalted – “heavenly places” (1:3). “The promise” echoes 1:13 and speaks of the hope *now* of the future actual entering into the inheritance. It also refers to the Abrahamic covenant alluded to in 2:12, stating that by being “in Christ” both Jewish and Gentile believers now appropriate it (cp. Galatians 3:8-16,26-29).

The prefix “with-” in 3:6, then, denotes the *closeness* of the union between Jew and Gentile because both are “in Christ.” In Him there is no difference between them. This is not the result of Gentiles being elevated to Israelite status. On the contrary, it first needed Jews to be reduced to Gentile status! The cross placed Jewish law-keepers on the same low ground before God as Gentile idolaters – sheer sinners. It showed that the Law, which Jews regarded as the basis of their special standing before God above Gentiles, in fact only condemned them (cp. 2:2,3,14,15). God set both in the lowest place that He might lift them to the highest. Not, however, as Jews and “honorary Jews,” but, rather, as forming “one new man” “in Christ” (2:15). And in that new, resurrection man, “there is neither Greek nor Jew, but Christ is all and in all” (cp. Colossians 3:10-11).

Being a “before-hoper”

In line with this, Ephesians 3:6 says that we receive this place in Christ “through the gospel.” But 1:11-13 sheds further, important light on “through the gospel.” Those who gain this inheritance in Christ are “before-hopers” in Him. For this is how “first trusted” (v.12, NKJV) ought to be translated (cp. Revised Version [1881]). It denotes those who believe in Him before the day of His glory when His supremacy will force itself upon the world’s sight. The mention in 1:13-14 of the sealing “with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance...” confirms that the emphasis here is on the anticipatory character of our believing. It does not refer to hoping in Christ before His first coming, but before His second.

The apostles were the first “before-hopers,” and they “obtained an inheritance in Him” (1:11-12). But those who were saved through their evangelism are also “before-hopers” (1:13). This exposition requires some re-translation of v.13. It will be noted that, in the NKJV for example, “trusted” (v.13) is in italics, showing that the translators added this verb to complete the sense in English. But an inferred, unstated verb should be a verb previously occurring, and that verb is the

“before-hoped” in v.12. So v.13 should read, “In him you also *before-hoped*, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation...” (cp. John 20:29).

God has given us the unique blessing of the opportunity to believe in His beloved Son in the time when He is disbelieved, discounted and hated in this world (Romans 8:17-24; 2 Timothy 2:12; Luke 22:28-9). We have believed, not out of our own perceptiveness or goodness, but purely out of His own limitless grace, which He wills to make the foundation of His praise in all eternity (Ephesians 2:1-8). He has left this long gap between Israel’s rejection of its Messiah and His coming again, so that millions and millions (including innumerable believing Jews) will share in the glories that He confers on His beloved Son as Man. Meanwhile grace has been given to us “to preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of the Christ” – the One whom man despises and the nation abhors (Isaiah 49:7). These are the riches in His Person, His Godhead, in His work and in the grace that flows out of it; in the relationships of grace, and in all the blessings in Him. The hostile beings who challenge Christ’s supremacy in heavenly places (Ephesians 3:10; cp. 6:12) see the “the mystery of Christ” working itself out (3:9), not in the obliteration of the human race that murdered Him (as they might expect), but in the vilest, through that murder, being “taken into favour in the Beloved” (1:6) and the destitute heathen being made heirs in Christ. They see, to their shock, how “the manifold wisdom of God” works out in *grace*.

Is Israel obsolete?

But why then should there be any special blessings for Israel as such? Does all the above not mean that God had finished with Abraham’s natural descendants? Paul’s answer in Romans 9-11 shows that God certainly had not. Indeed, so certainly *not*, that the *mystery* of Israel was the *delay* in God’s blessing them – for the sake of the Gentiles (Romans 11:1, 25; 16:25).

Paul’s reasoning in Romans 9-11 is peculiar, except on one supposition. He treats Israel’s response to the gospel as rejection of it, so that “[his] heart’s desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved” (10:1). He feels their rejection of it so intensely that, echoing Moses, he could wish himself accursed for the sake of his kinsmen according to the flesh (9:1,3; cp. Exodus 32:32). But in fact it seems certain that a *far* greater number, let alone proportion, of Jews had accepted the gospel by that date than of Gentiles – compare the tens of thousands in the church at Jerusalem (Acts 2:41; 21:20) with the obviously tiny Gentile congrega-

*They see, to their shock, how
“the manifold wisdom of God” works out in grace*

tions thinly strung across Asia Minor and Greece. To a modern evangelist, the “Jewish mission” would have been incomparably more successful than the “Gentile mission.” Yet Paul treats it as a failure. Paul could only have so regarded it because the yardstick of success that he was applying was the salvation of *all* Israel (Romans 11:26).

This yardstick was not exaggerated by affection for his fellow-nationals (intense though this was), but soberly deduced from the promises in the Word of God. Paul only quotes the Old Testament extensively when dealing with national Jews, or with points raised by them; and nowhere does he quote it as extensively as in Romans 9 – 11. If he had believed that since the cross the OT promises referred indiscriminately to all believers, whether Jew or Gentile, his texts would have been powerless to prove his point here about the salvation, specifically, of “all Israel” – a phrase (11:26) which, in the context, plainly is *not* some code or figure for “all believers.”

These same promises plainly predict a separate status for Israel in its national salvation (e.g. Jeremiah 31:36; Isaiah 66:22). And so does Paul’s argument in Romans 9-11. The “all Israel” saved in that coming day stands in contrast to the salvation of *some of them* at this present time (11:1,5,14). However even in that day “all Israel” will in fact mean a remnant of them, numerically speaking (9:27). Therefore the adjective “all” must bear not a numerical significance, but an integral – Israel *as a unit in salvation* (11:26). Paul therefore was not looking forward to a future time when hosts of Jews would be saved and thus lose their national identity in gaining the status of “with-heirs” and “with-body” with Gentiles (an interpretation which reduces “all Israel” to the tautology of “all the Israelites who will be saved”). Rather, he looked towards a future true realisation of their nationhood before God (cp. John 11:52). Matthew 19:28 may have a bearing on the relationship between “the church which is His body” and Israel in that day.

Therefore, whereas the blessings of “the mystery of Christ” were unpredicted in the Old Testament, the salvation of “all Israel” will happen as and because predicted in the Old Testament: Christ came “for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made to the fathers” (15:8) – not to revise or re-configure them. The OT itself abundantly makes clear that the promises will not be fulfilled *because* of their natural descent, or of their faithfulness to the covenant, but rather “to a disobedient and contrary people” only because of sheer, causeless electing mercy (Romans 10:21; 11:28,32). Just like the Gentiles, Israel will be saved only by a faith in Christ that repudiates its own righteousness (10:1-4).

However, although the grounds of salvation are the same, there is one vital difference between salvation now under the preaching of the gospel and the salvation

of “all Israel” in time to come. The former are saved by faith in Christ *prior to* His appearing again in glory. But in Romans 11:26 we read that “all Israel” will be saved *by* His coming again in glory. It will not be the salvation of “before-hoppers” in Christ. Of course Israelites are being saved in the present gospel-day; achieving this was an indirect object of Paul’s Gentile mission (11:13-14). But even whilst “some of them” are being saved, “all Israel” are “enemies” concerning the gospel, for the sake of the Gentiles (11:28). The salvation of “all Israel” will be along another line, so to speak. It will occur when they believe on their once-crucified Messiah at His appearing in glory. Zechariah 12:10; 13:1 describe this event.

Why Israel?

The answer to this is in the truth that God must be God: He is a promise-keeping God (Romans 11:29). “I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands” (Isaiah 49:14-16). In order to reach its promises Israel will have to learn that their self-righteous, law-keeping efforts to undo the idolatry of their ancestors made them crucify their Messiah. There was pride in their national penitence which blinded them to God’s lowly Man. Though they wore sackcloth next to their skin, they murdered God’s true Elisha (cp. 2 Kings 6:30-31). However God consigned even the Jews, the best and noblest of mankind, to disobedience, that He might have mercy upon *all* (Romans 11:32). The universality of this “all” – Gentile as well as Jew, Jew as well as Gentile – is the signature of God (cp. John 3:16). These things are “the unveiling of His heart;” for the unconditionality of His mercy to the disobedient “all” is the display of the infinite worth to Him of His Son. He grants uncovenanted mercy, and blessings hidden in His heart from all eternity to sinners who “before-hope” in His rejected Son. But He keeps His covenanted promises to Israel, though it has forfeited all covenant claims upon Him, when they see His Son in glory and repent. “Oh the depth of the riches, both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and his ways past finding out!” (Romans 11:33)

And this is the answer to those who say that the referring of various passages to the hopes of Israel, in effect, makes parts of God’s inspired Word irrelevant to us. Their objection overlooks Romans 15:4. But the main answer is the question: do we read the Bible to find out about ourselves and our blessings, or to find out about the superlative greatness of the Triune God? Both, of course; but primarily the latter. “I am finding out the *greatness* of thy loving heart.”

God must be God: He is a promise-keeping God

The Sure Purposes of God

Part 4: Zion

Jim Wolf

David could not rest till he had brought the ark to Zion, God's own place of rest. This article applies the meaning of David's longing in Psalm 132 to us.

“Lord, remember David, and all his afflictions... There will I make the horn of David to bud: I have ordained a lamp for my anointed” (Psalm 132:1,17)

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

Jerusalem and Zion

In these studies we have looked at the statement in Numbers 13 quoted above, and noted that while Hebron denotes faith laying hold on the sure purposes of God, Zoan in Egypt typifies the restless world and its pleasures. In our third study Jericho was linked with man’s defiant opposition to the revealed purposes of God and God’s sovereign mercy in the face of such opposition.

Zion is the subject of our last study in this series, and it is linked with the crown of that purpose, namely God’s own rest and dwelling place. This is typified in David’s great desire to provide a house for the Lord and a resting place for the ark of God.

Jericho was the first city to fall to the Israelites when they entered the land. Zion did not fall until David took it from the Jebusites (2 Samuel 5:7); even though, as we shall see, the city of Jerusalem itself had been occupied by Israel from the time of Joshua. Zion was

the strongly fortified part of Jerusalem. Who were the Jebusites? They are first mentioned as early as Genesis 10:16, in the genealogy of Noah after the flood. They were descendants of Ham who eventually settled in Canaan and built as their capital city, Jerusalem, also known as Salem. You will remember that Melchizedek was described as king of Salem and priest of the most high God when he came out to meet Abram with refreshments after the rescue of Lot (Genesis 14:18).

There are a few more mentions of the Jebusites, but Jerusalem is not mentioned again until it is seen as the prime mover of the confederacy that went up against the city of Gibeon – the city which by guile had made a peace pact with Joshua.

The account of this is in Joshua 10:3-4, and it is a remarkable chapter, well worth reading again. In it we see the mighty hand of God fulfilling His purposes without a great deal of help from man. We saw in a previous study how God had elevated Joshua in the sight of his followers; and in that first test of his leadership God had allowed him to be seen as a competent leader to be compared favourably with Moses. In this instance God says to him, “Fear not, for

I have delivered them into thine hand” (10:8). We then see the wonderful way in which God intervenes and rains rocks down upon the fleeing armies of the five kings; and how the sun and the moon stand still until Joshua and his men are so weary that they can do no more. Scripture records that the interventions by God slew more than all Joshua’s armies slew between them (v.11).

Tolerating God’s enemies

There is also a highly significant verse (v.20) that tells us that when Joshua and his army had stayed their hand, those who escaped entered fortified cities. One of these fortified places was doubtless Zion, for we read in 2 Samuel 5:6 that their descendants were still in occupation when David took up reins of kingship over all Israel. I suppose they had become tolerated in their fortress on the hilltop. “They don’t do anyone any harm so just leave them alone. They trade with us, after all, and contribute to the economy.” We can imagine all the arguments; but in spite of them, and even after all these years, they were still the enemy who hated the Israelites and their God.

This can be seen in the way in which they mock and deride God’s anointed king, little realizing that in mocking David they were in truth mocking God. I always used to wonder why God had judged the youths who called Elisha, “thou bald head” (2 Kings 2:23), but, of course, with more mature study I realised from the preceding words – “go thou up” – that it was *God* and Elisha as *His prophet* that they were mocking. In

just the same way we hear Saul of Tarsus being asked, “Why are you persecuting me?” When Saul replied by asking, “Who art thou, Lord?” he received the answer, “I am Jesus, whom thou persecutest” (Acts 9:4-5). The Lord feels the trials and tribulations of His own, and, though He might not always intervene, He supplies grace in time of need and gives us encouragement in the way.

The Jebusites thought they were in an impregnable position. They probably had adequate supplies and, best of all, they had a good water supply that could not be cut off. In a siege situation the water supply is usually the key factor, so this was their strength. But it was by their strong point that David attacked them. His mighty men went up the watercourse (2 Samuel 5:8, Darby Trans.), and so got into the stronghold.

In this little section we must note two things, namely, Israel’s moral state and attitude towards the things of God, and Israel’s associations. We have seen in earlier studies, indeed, what Scripture teaches us about evil associations and what they can lead to. So, let us examine our associations. Too often we take this to mean our associations with other Christians, and forget that Scripture speaks of our associations with the world (as typified by Zoan and Egypt). Too often we hear of Christians who no doubt love the Lord, and yet tolerate all their old associations, even going out of their way to cultivate them. It is no wonder that we have so many shallow Christians and that the testimony to the world is so weak, when Christians can-

not differentiate between the two groups. There was no doubt in the case of the disciples. It was said of them that people could see that they had been with Jesus (Acts 4:13). God said of Israel that it should not be counted among the nations but should be separated wholly unto Him (cp. Numbers 22:12; 23:9). We also are separated unto Christ; and we have an immense advantage over the children of Israel in that we have the Holy Spirit abiding with us to help and direct us on our pathway, if we let him have sway with us. Do we still desire association with a world that is condemned to destruction? May God in His grace help us to overcome the temptations of this present evil world.

Desiring God's rest

Psalm 132 is David's response to the victory at Zion, for David took the stronghold and made it his own. Indeed, it became known as the city of David. We read that he became so powerful and respected by the nations around, that Hiram, the king of Tyre, sent him cedar wood and skilled workmen who built a house for him to dwell in. So David had a kingdom; he had a city within that kingdom; he had a fortress within the city; and he had a beautiful house of cedar within the fortress. "Well done, David!" we might say, "God has truly blessed you with the fatness of the land. You can settle down and take your ease for a while." I am sure this was a great temptation, but did it satisfy David? No! he had a deep longing. It was his great desire to honour God by bringing again to Jerusalem the ark of God that had

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desire association
with a world
that is condemned
to destruction?*

been taken by the Philistines, and in so doing to find a resting place for it.

"Lo, we heard of it in Ephrata [Bethlehem]: we found it in the fields of the wood [i.e. Kirjath-Jearim]" (Psalm 132:6). Bethlehem was the place where David had been born, had grown up and had been anointed as the future king of Israel. David had known that the ark had returned to Israel even when he was still at Bethlehem, but, it seems, he had not known exactly where it was.

You will remember Eli's grandchild in 1 Samuel 4:21. His mother was in child-birth when the news came of the death of both her husband and her father-in-law, of the defeat of the army and the capture of the ark. She "named the child Ichabod, saying, The glory is departed from Israel: because the ark of God was taken." What a sad state of affairs! Not only had the Philistines taken the ark, but when the Lord punished them for this by visiting them with all manner of plagues and making them so afraid that they decided to return it, the people of Israel, glad though they were to see it come back, did not know how to treat it

with due reverence. What do we find? They were consumed with curiosity and took a “peek” inside the ark. Judgment came upon them as it had on the Philistines, and many men of that place died (1 Samuel 6:19). They were then afraid of the ark, and sent for the men of Kirjath-jearim who gladly came, took the ark and found a place for it. It stayed there for a long time, twenty years (1 Samuel 7:1, 2).

When Bethlehem was still known as Ephrathah we know it as the place where Rachel died and was buried. She died in childbirth, and, when her son was brought to her, she named him “Benoni,” effectively saying, “he is the son of my sorrow.” But Jacob called him “Benjamin” – “son of my right hand” (Genesis 35:16-19). The right hand is the place of favour. It denotes strength and power. It would remind us of the quotation from Psalm 110:1, “Sit thou at my right hand until I make thine enemies thy footstool.” It reminds us that though the Lord is, as it were, resting at this moment in time, there is a time coming when He will come into the world again “in power and great glory,” and will establish His reign of righteousness.

Again we find another mention of Ephrathah in Micah 5:2: “...Bethlehem Ephrathah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.”

We have looked a little at the history of this place and have seen that Benjamin

was born there, typifying Christ in power and strength. We have noted also that David was born there, speaking to us of God’s new beginning for Israel. He was shepherd and king, a man after God’s own heart (1 Samuel 13:14). In the fulness of time Christ also was born in Bethlehem to the acclamation of the angels, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good pleasure in men” (Luke 2:14 Darby Trans.). God’s rest was in view but not yet achieved.

Man’s deception; God’s promise

Kirjath-jearim is first mentioned in Joshua 9:17, where we are told that the inhabitants came to Joshua and deceived him into thinking they were not of the land, because they sought peace and friendship with Israel. Joshua swore by an oath that they would indeed be left in peace. So what marked the city was deception on the one hand, and the unalterable oath on the other. The deception would remind us of the deceitful kiss of Judas by which he



Kirjath-jearim

betrayed the Lord, and would warn us of what lies behind the friendship of the world. “The friendship of the world is enmity with God” (James 4: 4). We see in particular the amount of deceit that was used by man in the mock trial that the Lord endured with fortitude and patience, and that ended on the cross at Calvary.

The unalterable oath speaks to us of God’s oath in connection with resurrection, that we can trace typically in the report of Abraham and the offering up of Isaac. We see in this beautiful story a picture of the perfect obedience of the son, his willingness to go and, more importantly, his being received again from the dead – in figure in the case of Isaac, but in actuality with Christ. And the oath? Well, this confirmed the promise to Abraham: “By myself have I sworn... And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice” (Genesis 22:16,18). Surely this was fulfilled in perfection by our Lord Jesus Christ.

Seeking “Zion”

However, we must return again to the bigger picture as typified in the taking of the stronghold of Zion. It speaks to us of the mighty conflict and triumph of the death of Christ, in which He dealt with the “sin question” and all the powers of darkness; and did everything and accomplished everything in accordance with God’s purpose and plan. We also see in His resurrection and ascension into the glory of God that these purposes have in view Christ’s glory and Christ’s rest.

David, in the Psalm we have been considering, could say, ‘Lord, remember David, and all his afflictions.’ G.W. Frazer’s beautiful hymn says:

“This do remember Me”:

Oh, deep desire of love

As round Thy soul those waves did roll
Of wrath from God above.

“This do remember Me”:

Oh, what a savour sweet

To God above! To man what love
Is in Thy work complete!

Now gathered round Thee here

With heart and conscience free,

O Lord, once dead, whose blood was shed,
We do remember Thee.

God has indeed triumphed in His beloved Son and has established Zion as His place of rest; and what marks it out is the supreme exaltation of His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. He exclaims, “I have set my King on my holy hill of Zion” (Psalm 2:6).

May God enable us to enter into more of the fulness of all that He has purposed in Christ, the true Zion, His eternal rest and dwelling place.

*God has indeed
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has established Zion
as His place of rest*

*Genuine
revival
begins
with
a
hunger
for
the
Word
of God*

A Look at Nehemiah for Today

Part 11: Repentant prayer (9:1-38)

Ted Murray

Nehemiah 9 is one of the great prayers of the Bible. You can't afford to neglect it! It starts with the immense greatness of God, and of His saving work, but then proceeds through confession of failure to gratitude for forgiveness and commitment to renewal.

Repentance and separation

What effect should Bible-reading have?

Confession, separation, more Bible-reading, and prayer leading to action! The eighth chapter of Nehemiah records the main activity during the first Feast of Tabernacles of Nehemiah's governorship of the province of Judah. The – rather sparse – numbers of Jews who had returned from exile all eventually came together to celebrate it (8:2,17) – that was impressive. What was more impressive was that they demanded that the Word of God be read to them, on the first day, the second and all the other days of the Feast (8:1,13,18). Genuine revival begins with a hunger for the Word of God. Do we see that today, in a time when Bible and Scripture-reading societies are reporting a decline in Bible reading? These Jews made their “convention” truly a “Bible convention”!

It is easy to be affected emotionally by what is taking place in large conventions of Christian people. The disturbing reports of the so-called “Toronto Blessing” of the mid-1990s are a regrettable instance of this. It is also possible for those who address large numbers of people to use what could be termed “the cosy chat” method to warm people up in their “comfort zones”, by telling them about God’s wonderful love, without addressing the hard question of sin and the need for repentance.

The attenders of the Feast in Nehemiah 8 also were deeply affected by their eight-days' experience. So affected indeed, that they were still there on a ninth day, after the prescribed feast-days had ended. But *how* were they affected? Fasting, sack-cloth, and dust on their heads! (9:1) Personal repentance was the effect of hearing the word of God. The Law had reached their consciences, affected their lives, and caused this change in their appearance and demeanour. This demonstrates the true effect of the living Word of God on someone who bows to its authority. All too often, however, we ignore the Word when it is read and explained, due to what we give priority to in our lives. This causes weakness in our witness, lack of interest in attending Christian meetings and little or no blessing in the Gospel.

The second effect of their eight-days' Bible reading broaches an unfashionable topic. "Then those who were of Israelite lineage separated themselves from all foreigners; and they stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers" (9:2). The word "Israelite" marks them out as God's chosen ones (cp. Amos 3:2). To day, those who truly belong to the church of God are the chosen of God in Christ (Ephesians 1:4). Like these repentant Jews, they have been affected by the word of God, repented of their sins, and separated themselves from the things of the world as they confessed their need of God's mercy and grace. The Israelites of Nehemiah's day didn't stop at half-measures: they "separated themselves from all foreigners." Though the truth of separation has an important positive side to it, this emphasizes the negative side. The Christian requirement today is not to separate physically from unbelievers (1 Corinthians 5:10; though cp. 1 Corinthians 10:14; 2 Timothy 2:22). But the New Testament is full of warnings about the character of the world and the need for moral separation from it.

We are exhorted, "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him" (1 John 2:15). John repeatedly writes of our relationships with and to the world. He warns us about its false prophets, its transience, and its opposition to the Father (2:16-23; 4:1). But he also encourages us about our victory over it: "For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world – our faith" (5:4). When we remind ourselves of what is in the world, as John characterizes it,

Personal repentance was the effect of hearing the word of God

it is amazing that we continue to embrace some of its facets and enslave ourselves to its trends. There is a tendency today to pick and choose the things which we exclude from our daily lives according to the world's current standards, rather than God's standards. We have come to tolerate practices that are commonplace in today's world, with the consequence that the world has affected the church and continues to. Sometimes we make the excuse that we are only doing what has been done before. There is a need to confess our sins as well as the sins of those who have gone before. James, too, uses very strong language about friendship with the world: "Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God" (James 4:4). Separation from the world is a very serious subject: studying the word of God makes us realise how important it is in the eyes of a holy God. May we all fully realise the immensity and importance of this truth, confessing our sins and failures before Him.

More of the Bible

Having separated themselves from all foreigners, they then "stood up in their place and read from the Book" (Nehemiah 9:3). That is, they occupied the ground of truth that they had been brought into – so should we – and they desired to learn still more of what Scripture reveals – so should we. Sadly, we find amongst some younger people the tendency to find a place of fellowship that suits them and gives them a sense of well-being, the yardstick of the Scriptures being seldom applied to the situation. This is not what took place in Jerusalem in Nehemiah's day. Neither is it what has taken place in the revival-history of the church through the ages. There is no blessing without personal cost. The people, it is said (v.3), stood

There is a tendency today to pick and choose the things which we exclude from our daily lives according to the world's current standards, rather than God's standards

for a quarter of the day to hear the word of God; and for another quarter of the day, they confessed and worshipped the Lord their God.

How important it is to confess the Lord both individually and collectively! It is as we confess and own Him as Lord that we experience some measure of His greatness and grace. Realising His greatness in obtaining our salvation at Calvary, and the immensity of His grace in meeting our needs leads our hearts to worship Him. These people in Jerusalem knew about deliverance, safety and security. They had been delivered from Babylon, and had managed, against all odds, to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, which, together with the gatekeepers posted, gave them a sense of safety and security. Having seen the Lord's hand with them, it is little wonder that they stood confessing and worshipping the Lord their God. The basis and the cause of worship today is reflecting on what the Lord has done, on what He continues to do day by day, and on the prospect of being with Him in the place of safety and security that He has gone to prepare for those that love Him.

The catchy tunes, repetitive phrases and noisy bands with so-called "worship leaders," that have become prevalent in many evangelical circles, are not what lead our hearts to worship "in spirit and in truth," but, rather, a deep sense of the greatness, goodness and grace of the Lord and our privilege of being in the presence of One so holy. This is worship. We share the same deep emotions that Thomas experienced in the upper room when the Lord said to him, "Reach hither your finger" (John 20:27-28, A.V.).

A great prayer meeting

This reading of the Law had a remarkable effect on some Levites (Nehemiah 9:4). It caused them to identify themselves very prominently in front of the people that had gathered in Jerusalem. They did not hide their light under a bushel (Luke 11:33), but stood on "the stairs of the Levites." This was one of the places of access into the Temple Court. It may have been the place from which, in former times, the Psalms of Ascent (120-134), had been sung as the people entered the Temple. Thus these Levites took a place where they couldn't be missed and from that place led the people in a prayer that also exhorted, encouraged and reminded them of things which the Lord their God had done for them. This act, which took place so long ago, is repeated in many different ways today. Faithful servants of God often remind us of His greatness, grace, mercy and love bestowed upon us throughout our lives. It is recorded that Mattaniah led the thanksgiving psalms, he and his brethren (Nehemiah 12:8). The meaning of his name is worth noting: "God is Primeval" or, "God First, self last"! What a place of privilege this man had as he led the people in thanksgiving! And as we gather each Lord's Day to remem-

ber the Lord, this privilege is granted to the brother who gives out the first hymn, thus leading the thanksgiving. It also behoves us to remember that the first hymn usually sets the theme of praise for the meeting, and it should be one that draws our attention to the Lord.

These Levites' prayer is probably the longest prayer recorded in the Scriptures. In it there are many lessons for us today. Its opening phrases centre on the greatness of God and on the place where He dwells. It has a ring of what is generally called, "The Lord's Prayer."

Verse 5 reminds us of the *supremacy* of God, and how important it is to praise His glorious Name at all times. Verse 6 brings forth the *Creator* God. Whilst even in our atheistic day many accept that there is a Creator God, it is only the believer who has accepted Christ as Saviour who acknowledges that "all things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made" (John 1:3 A.V.). This truth is reiterated in Colossians 1:16 and Hebrews 1:2.

Verses 7-8 show us the *sovereignty* of God, in the way that He called Abram from Ur, and gave him a new name and an inheritance. This surely reminds us of God's sovereign work in our lives. Paul, writing to the Ephesians, brings to the readers this tremendous truth that we, too, are called by God, and have been given an inheritance (Ephesians 1:4,11). The apostle Peter described that inheritance as "incorruptible and undefiled and... reserved in heaven for you who are kept by the power of God...." (1 Peter 1:4).

Verses 9-11 of the prayer turn to the *redeeming* work of God. The Levites recount how God, the Redeemer of Israel, had delivered them from the bondage of Egypt. They recite how God had seen the affliction of their fathers, heard their cry by the Red Sea, and worked wonders against Pharaoh, dividing the waters of the sea so that the people passed through on dry land. Surely the remembrance of this mighty work, as well as of what God had recently accomplished, would enlarge the listeners' sense of the greatness of their God and increase their gratitude towards Him. As we reflect on the infinitely higher cost of our redemption – the precious blood of Christ – we, too, should have that sense of awe, wonder, and gratitude and be filled with praise.

Supremacy sovereignty redemption grace

Verses 12-15 recall the *grace* of God, in the way that He cared for the people; guided them with the cloud and the pillar; gave them the Law, so that they could live orderly lives before Him and with one another; and, for their physical needs, instituted the Sabbath and gave them manna and water. God, who had brought them out of Egypt, now brought them through their wilderness journey.

Grace and commitment

But, as the behaviour of the Israelites on that journey is recollected in verse 17, we see God as a *forgiving* God. The verse summarises “the ways of God in grace,” calling to mind the lines, “Who is a pardoning God like Thee? Or who has grace so rich and free?” In spite of all their waywardness, God brought them into the land. We can rest assured that God’s purposes are never thwarted. But we also see how in spite of all the blessings of redemption through the blood of Christ, according to the riches of God’s grace, and of the very faith to believe (Ephesians 1:7; 2:8), we fail in our Christian pathway, and have to be chastened. This is a mark of sonship. “For whom the LORD loves he chastens, And scourges every son whom he receives” (Hebrews 12:6). The prayer before us also relates the wonderful moment when God brought them into the land. The victories of the way had been accomplished, the Canaanites had been subdued and it was the time of the harvest (Nehemiah 9:22-25).

Then the prayer comes to the sad and sorry tale of Israel’s disobedience in the land. It states that “they cast your law behind their backs” (9:26): how sad it is that today in Christendom we see many disregarding the Word of God, and also belittling those who faithfully uphold the authority of the Scriptures. Perhaps it is because of the general departure from the Word of God that we, in Western Europe, are witnessing a decline in moral standards, often led by governments passing laws that promote what is abhorrent to God.

But in this prayer we also see, that at the times when the people fully realised their helplessness and turned to the Lord for help, He heard their cry and gave them deliverers (9:27). Correspondingly, in the church’s history, there have been men of God who have brought about a restoration in its testimony after failure. Men, such as Huss, Calvin, Luther, the Wesleys and Whitefield, Darby, Kelly, Spurgeon, Moody and latterly Graham, were used by God to bring deliverance, salvation and restoration. The influence of these men of God has sadly waned and, once again, we see the effects of the work of Satan in the church and in society. Verse 28 states “Therefore You left them in the hand of their enemies”. This dreadful situation rather resembles what is around us today. The enemy of our souls seems to be in control. However, we take courage as we remind ourselves that “whom the LORD

loves he chastens, and scourges every son whom he receives” (Hebrews 12:6). The Lord assures us of His love even when times are dark, and we experience, like Israel, that God is indeed gracious and merciful (Nehemiah 9:31).

As the Levites on the steps led the people in this prayer, they came to a point where the only thing left was to confess their failure and the sin of the people. Thankfully, they didn’t leave it at that. They took the next step of making a covenant to renew their allegiance to the Lord (9:32ff). In this last part of the prayer they acknowledge God’s greatness, faithfulness and goodness, and cast themselves on His mercy. In our day, the day of grace, it is good for us, as individuals as well as collectively, to be reminded of the way that God has worked in our lives. Stocktaking is an important annual task in every business. It also should be regularly undertaken in our spiritual lives. It is only then, when looking back over our lives, that we shall see the way God has worked in them. When writing the hymn, “Rise my soul thy God directs thee” (No 76 in *Psalms and Hymns and Spiritual Songs*¹), Darby appears to have looked at the way God had been involved in his pathway, and thus penned the moving words: “What the God that thou hast found.” We, like the Israelites of old who were prepared to write a sure covenant (9:38), should renew our efforts to serve the Lord, more fervently and faithfully, whilst we wait for His return. For as the last verse of the hymn referred to reminds us:

There no stranger-God shall meet thee,
Stranger thou in courts above.
He who to His rest shall greet thee,
Greets thee with a well known love.

*Stocktaking
is an
important
annual
task
in every
business.*

*It also
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regularly
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spiritual
lives*

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The High Calling

Psalm 45:9

Child of the Eternal Father,
Bride of the Eternal Son,
Dwelling-place of God the Spirit,
Thus with Christ made ever one;
Dowered with joy beyond the Angels
Nearest to His throne,
They, the ministers attending
His beloved one:
Granted all my heart's desire,
All things made my own;
Feared by all the powers of evil,
Fearing God alone;
Walking with the Lord in glory
Through the courts divine,
Queen within the royal palace,
Christ for ever mine;

Say, poor worldling, can it be,
That my heart should envy thee?

Gerhardt Ter Steegen