

Scripture Truth



The Gospel in Job
Some Problems Christians Face...Conflict
Can God Suffer Pain?
What Does the Bible Say About...Worship?
Lessons from Ezra
Lessons from Isaiah ch.40 for Today

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The Gospel in Job

Part I

Yannick Ford

Parts of the book of Job have passed into everyday language e.g. Job's comforters, the patience of Job. But this ancient and often neglected book is important for the spiritual truths it contains. We welcome this article from a new contributor to Scripture Truth.

Introduction

The book of Job is very old, and is thought to relate incidents which occurred in patriarchal times, such as in the times of Abraham. The majority of the book is taken up with the lengthy sayings of Job and his friends. In themselves, these sayings must be important even for us today (1 Timothy 3:16). Most importantly, the great truths of the Gospel, the good news of God's love toward us and His provision for our sin – these are clearly brought out in this ancient book. So, too, are the activities of Satan, and his ultimate defeat by God.

In this series, we shall focus on the Gospel of the grace of God as seen in this book. There is a parallel strand to this. The New Testament teaches us that our sins can be forgiven, and so we can be made right with God – that is the beginning of the Gospel of the grace of God. But the New Testament further teaches us that the root cause of *our sins*, our sinful nature, has also been dealt with. The biblical expression for *our sinful nature* is “sin in the flesh”, and we are told that this has been condemned at the cross of Jesus (Romans 8:3). Often this is not an easy concept to grasp. There are many issues surrounding this truth, but at this point we can just consider the fact that we *cannot* stand before God *in our own merits or strength*. Job needed to learn this.

These two major strands – the Gospel that brings us forgiveness of sins, and the need to understand that our sinful nature has also been dealt with – are repeatedly brought out in this book. The repetition is valuable. The way that God teaches us through His word is very often “precept upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little” (Isaiah 28:13). The truths of God are never too complicated for our intellect, but they are often too difficult for our *pride*. And so we are taught “here a little, there a little” as we read through the Bible, so that we may learn to assimilate these truths, and they will become part of us.

We can be made right with God

Job's friends also play a major part. Indeed, their arguments with Job take up the majority of the book. They did not understand that Job was a good man, a servant of God, who nevertheless needed to learn not to trust in his own righteousness. Their main thrust was, as we shall see, that Job must have committed some serious sin for God to have brought Job's sufferings on him. As such, they were not helpful to Job. Indeed, God Himself expresses His displeasure at their sayings (Job 42:7).

The expression 'Job's comforters' has become proverbial for those who try to sympathise with you, whilst at the same time suggesting that you have brought your problems on yourself. It is important to realise that while Job's friends said many *true* things, most were *not applied* in the right way.

The book of Job was originally written in Hebrew, like the majority of the Old Testament. Substantial parts of this book are in poetical form. Hebrew poetry does not rhyme as does some English poetry. Instead, there is a rhyming of ideas, known technically as parallelism. Three types of parallelism may be distinguished:

1. The second line repeats the meaning of the first line;
2. The second line adds meaning to or explains the first line;
3. The second line is opposite in meaning from the first line.

Job 40:18 is an example of the first type: "His bones are as strong pieces of brass; his bones are like bars of iron."

The unseen conflict (Job 1:1- 2:10)

Ch.1 begins by introducing Job, his family, his property and where he lived. He "was perfect and upright, and one that feared God and abstained from evil" (v.1). What does it mean to say that Job was 'perfect'? Noah was also described as perfect, and Abraham was called to be perfect (Genesis 6:9; 17:1). 'Perfect' does not mean sinless or absolute perfection, but rather suggests the idea of completeness and maturity. Luke 6:40, Ephesians 4:13, Colossians 4:12, 1 Thessalonians 3:10 and 2 Timothy 3:17 are New Testament examples of the use of the word 'perfect' in the sense of complete, mature or full-grown. It is also applied to the Lord Jesus Himself in Hebrews 2:10. We can, therefore, paraphrase v.1 by saying that Job was an upright man, not lacking or at fault in any obvious way, and in keeping with this, he abstained from evil.

God had blessed Job with material goods, which was a sign of His favour in Old Testament times. Job was blessed with children, servants, and substance. Today, those who know the Lord Jesus Christ as Saviour are blessed in spiritual rather than material ways (see Ephesians 1:3; Colossians 3:1,2). The challenge for us, therefore, is whether we know and enjoy these spiritual blessings in a real way.

Vv.4,5 show Job's concern for the spiritual well-being of his family. Job's sons feasted "every one on his day", which presumably means his birthday. Job was concerned for them lest they may have been tempted to curse God during their feasting, and so he offered burnt offerings for them all. In the light of the New Testament, we know that, in

themselves, sacrifices cannot take away sins. Those Old Testament sacrifices pointed forward to the death of Christ as atonement for our sins (Hebrews 10:4,10).

We are transported to a different scene altogether in v.6, where we see angels gathered together to give an account of their service to the Lord. Satan also comes with them, so the Lord asks him, “Whence comest thou?” God never asks questions for His own benefit since He does not need to ask to find out the answer. The question must have been intended as a rebuke for Satan.

It is worthwhile digressing a little here to point out some common misconceptions regarding Satan and his activities. The western world largely does not believe in the existence of Satan, or else regards him as some evil, mythological character, often portrayed with goat’s feet and tail, and thought to rule over his demons in the kingdom of hell. Satan is not reigning in hell. The Bible tells us that he will be cast into hell in the future (Revelation 20:10), and that, far from being Satan’s kingdom, hell has been prepared for him as his punishment (Matthew 25:41).

It is worth stressing this fact: hell was prepared specifically for the *devil and his angels*. It is not God’s desire that any *persons* should end up there (John 3:16; 2 Peter 3:9). The fact that some will do so is a tragedy of their own making, since full provision has been made so that *no-one needs to go there*, as we shall see as we go through this book of Job. The death of Christ is sufficient for all who desire the forgiveness of their sins (John 3:17,18).

At present, however, Satan is ‘at large’, so to speak, and these chapters of Job show us something of his activities. The name ‘Satan’ means ‘adversary’, and this gives a clue as to his character. Satan, as our adversary, accuses us before God (Revelation 12:9,10). This is graphically portrayed in Zechariah 3:1-5. Satan’s accusations of us are, alas, not groundless, as shown figuratively in the foregoing passage by Joshua’s filthy clothes. We are all only too aware of our failings and sins which he could bring to God’s attention!

Satan’s object in presenting them to God is not merely to cause us misery, but he aims to strike at the character of God Himself. It is as if he is saying to God, “How can You, a holy God, show mercy to these sinners, whose sins are so evident? Surely this denies Your character of holiness?” And so Satan would seek to place God in a dilemma where He cannot exercise mercy in keeping with His character of love while, at the same time, maintain absolute righteousness in keeping with His character of holiness. But in the New Testament we have the wonderful truth that God’s judgment for sin was borne by the Lord Jesus Himself, so that we can now be justified in God’s sight, without any compromise of His holiness (1 Corinthians 15:3,4; Romans 4:24-5:1). This is foreshadowed in Zechariah where God can rebuke Satan and tell Joshua that He has caused his iniquity to pass away from him.

If sinners ever were to know
The depths of love divine,
All Calvary’s weakness and its woe,
Blest Saviour, must be Thine.

God's righteousness is there proclaimed,
His mercy's depths are known,
While to the full Thou hast maintained
The glory of His throne.

Returning to our study of Job, we see in v.8 that God challenges Satan with Job's exemplary behaviour. Satan insinuates, however, that Job's good conduct is simply a result of his material blessing. It is interesting that Satan refers to God's 'hedging Job about'. This gives us an insight into God's protection, and shows that Satan is unable to do anything against us beyond that specifically permitted by God – God remains in ultimate control!

We see this again in v.12. In response to Satan's retort, God allows Satan to afflict Job's possessions, but he is not allowed to touch Job himself. Vv. 13-19 underline Satan's malevolent character as we see how rapidly he carries out his mission. Note the expression in v.16 where the messenger refers to the "fire of God from heaven", whereas we know from the context that it was initiated by Satan.

Satan had said that Job would curse God to His face, but Job's reaction to this series of disasters is exemplary. V.21 is very true: we enter this world with nothing, and we can take nothing with us when we leave it. The apostle Paul says the same in 1 Timothy 6:7: "For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out." The Lord Jesus Himself alludes to this in Luke 12:15: "Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth." Yet how many of us would be able to react as Job did?

Satan presents himself to God again in chapter 2, and once again God challenges him with Job's exemplary conduct. Satan, who still wants to see Job curse God, now suggests that Job will not retain his integrity if his health is affected. And so once more, we see Satan rapidly fulfilling his desire, and Job is afflicted with a painful illness. V.9 shows us Job's own wife tempting Job to curse God, but still Job does not sin with his lips.

Satan was defeated – not once did Job curse God, even though he lost all his family, his possessions, and his health. In fact, we do not hear directly any more of Satan in the book of Job. However, we need to ask if there was not a deeper reason for Job's trial than the defeat of Satan in his attempt to cause Job to curse God. In a sense, God initiated the situation by bringing Job to Satan's attention. We need to be careful in our argument here, as James 1:13 tells us that "God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man." It was Satan who brought about Job's suffering and sought to lead Job to curse God. Satan displayed his character of evil in his response to God's challenge and in his dealings with Job. Nevertheless, God *allowed* Satan to act, but within defined limits, for a deeper purpose, and for Job's ultimate blessing, as we shall see as we continue our study.

God remains in ultimate control

Some Problems Christians Face

4. Conflict between Christians – how can it be resolved?

Gordon Kell

“Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!...For there the LORD commanded the blessing – life forevermore” (Psalm 133:1,3). Christians are not immune from the atmosphere of conflict currently engulfing the world. Yet Psalm 133 challenges us to unity and the consequent blessing which flows from it. This article is based on a talk given on London’s Premier Radio.

The Lord Jesus made it abundantly clear that He intended the unity of His Church to be a witness to the world of the love of God: “I do not pray for these alone (His disciples), but also for those who will believe in Me through their word (all subsequent Christians); that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me...that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me” (John 17:20-23).

The clearest demonstration of that unity is seen after Pentecost in Acts 2:41-47 and, as a result, the early Church, for a brief time, turned the world upside down: “Then those who gladly received his word were baptised; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers...Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common...So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.”

That early Church was marked by the love of God. It permeated every aspect of their lives, fulfilling the words of the Lord Jesus: “By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).

But it is not long before the first contention arises in the Church: “Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, “It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:1-4).

This is an interesting passage for several reasons. The cause of the contention was just – widows were being neglected. That is one of the characteristic features of all conflict. One party often has a just cause and, equally as often, the other party feels their cause is also justified. And so the scene is set for confrontation! The question then arises as to how the problem can be justly settled and the relationships, which had been endangered, preserved. The next thing we notice is the reaction of the apostles. It seems, on the face of it, a very spiritual one. “We must continue to get on with spiritual matters. You find some able men to resolve the problem.” In other words, sort it out yourselves. Was this true spiritual leadership? It is helpful to go back to another incident of conflict which directly involved these same apostles. There was a conflict between the disciples at the Lord’s Supper about which of them would be the greatest. John 13 records how Jesus rose from the table to wash His disciples’ feet, thus giving them a picture of true greatness – the willingness to serve one another in love. The Lord did not ignore the contention the disciples were having, or delegate its solution to another. By lowliness and love, He gave them the example of service: “If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you” (John 13:14-15). Perhaps the apostles had overlooked their Master’s simple but difficult example of leadership by serving. Christlikeness is about the life of Christ seen in me at times of conflict. However, the judgment of the apostles pleased the early Church and seven able men became willing servants. It is striking that of these seven, who took on the simple work of ‘serving tables’, to use the apostles’ words, Stephen became the first martyr of the Church and Philip the only man in Scripture who is given the title of evangelist (Acts 7:59; 21:8). These men show us that, when we are willing to walk in Christ’s steps, He will honour our service.

The final lesson to be learned from this first conflict is that it was resolved by spiritual men – men who were willing to sort out the problem and ensure that everyone was dealt with fairly. This was able to be brought about because the church was willing to submit to spiritual counsel. This is important. When problems arise, believers often react as most people in the world would. We struggle to have our cause heard. We insist on our rights being upheld. We look for sympathisers, people who will take sides. And, sadly, we put distance between those who will not take our side. We become entrenched. Brothers and sisters who have trusted Christ and preached reconciliation all their Christian lives suddenly become irreconcilable.

When we find ourselves in a situation of conflict, it is sometimes the wisest course to give place to those fighting against us and allow God the opportunity to resolve the difficulty for us. An outstanding example of this is found in Abraham and his nephew, Lot (see Genesis 13:5-11). They were both rich men with lots of cattle. They lived close together – too close!

The way Abraham deals with this problem is very striking. Although the older and richer man, he did not press for advantage but took the lower place and allowed Lot to choose what seemed to be the best of the land. What would we have done? Asserted our rights?

Fought our corner and negotiated a settlement to our advantage? Left the fellowship because we could not get our own way? Stopped speaking to brothers and sisters we once loved? Abraham was a man of faith. He believed that, by trusting in God, his way in life would be blessed. He was willing to suffer loss but have God on his side.

So often there is a general unwillingness amongst Christians to bear suffering and possible injustice and so follow Christ. Yet this is what Scripture teaches us is part of our calling and testimony to Christ: “For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God. For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth; who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously” (1 Peter 2:20-23).

Mahatma Ghandi mocked Christianity by saying he would have liked to become a Christian, but had never met one. When we read Peter’s words, we can see the point Ghandi was making. How willing am I to suffer injustice and thereby witness a Christlike character?

But there are times when problems between believers need to be sorted out in a direct way. The Lord Jesus gives us some clear help in Matthew 18:15-17: “Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that ‘by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.’ And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.”

The emphasis is on the one who is wronged to approach the person who wronged them. The spirit in which this is done is critical. We get general guidance in Galatians 6:1: “Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted.” Approaching others over difficult matters has to be undertaken in a spiritual and gracious way. Often problems between Christians are not because of one issue only but rather because of an accumulation of unsettled issues. It is only when we are able quietly and openly to sit down and discuss our difficulties, that we can begin to deal with them. This needs prayer, honesty and a willingness genuinely to forgive.

*Allow God the opportunity
to resolve the difficulty*

The Lord anticipated that sometimes the person we approach may not respond as we had hoped. In such circumstances, other spiritual Christians need to be involved to act as witnesses and help the process of reconciliation. As a last resort, the church has to make a judgment and act. Today, we live in a world which does not easily submit to authority of any kind. As Christians, we are expected by God to recognise the mistakes we make, to take steps to put them right, and to submit to the spiritual counsel of fellow Christians. Sadly, this course of action is often resisted and consequently, conflict is not resolved.

It is always a happy thing when someone recognises his or her faults and seeks to put the matter right. Proverbs 18:19 tells us, "A brother offended is harder to win than a strong city, and contentions are like the bars of a castle." So we need to tread carefully. At the same time, we have to play our part and be willing and ready to accept the apology of fellow Christians.

In 1 Corinthians 6, Paul analyses the problem of an unwillingness to be reconciled to each other: "Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unrighteous, and not before the saints? Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world will be judged by you, are you unworthy to judge the smallest matters? Do you not know that we shall judge angels? How much more, things that pertain to this life? If then you have judgments concerning things pertaining to this life, do you appoint those who are least esteemed by the church to judge? I say this to your shame. Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you, not even one, who will be able to judge between his brethren? But brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers! Now therefore, it is already an utter failure for you that you go to law against one another. Why do you not rather accept wrong? Why do you not rather let yourselves be cheated? No, you yourselves do wrong and cheat, and you do these things to your brethren!"

Paul powerfully exposes the dreadful behaviour of some Christians in conflict with each other. The reasons for conflict may have been business relationships or family relationships. It is immaterial. Paul accepts that conflicts between Christians occur but he insists that they be dealt with within the fellowship of God's people. Today, people quickly go to the law courts to defend themselves. It is a growth industry. Paul insists that difficulties between Christians should be settled in the church, and that submitting to wise spiritual advice is the key to this. He further argues that it is better to suffer loss than to go to court before unbelievers. This is not because non-Christian courts may be unjust but because of the shame brought to the Christian witness. How can Christ's redeemed people, who have known and preached to the world reconciliation to God, be unable to be reconciled to each other? How could those who taught the love of God then tell the world they are no longer able to love one another? It is a mockery of our faith to preach the forgiveness of Christ but refuse to forgive each other. Let us remember that God is not mocked! Such behaviour allows the world to call into question the power and nobility of the cross. It brings the Christian testimony into disrepute.

It seems that today we are in danger of losing sight of true Christianity – following Christ. Christ Himself plainly said that following Him would involve service and suffering. The

real proof of faith is its demonstration when things go wrong and become difficult and painful.

Each believer has made a life long commitment to Christ. On His part, He has saved us and will keep us to the end. But we are responsible to live out the demands of His love in our lives. This is never more true than in our relationships with fellow believers because it is the love which exists between us which shows the world that we are Christ's disciples (John 13:35).

The Christian fellowship is a family, so there are always going to be family problems. They come in all forms – personality clashes, jealousies, lack of consideration, taking each other for granted, failing to value one another – the list goes on! Even spiritual leaders sometimes have their disagreements. Indeed, God has given us in His word a clear example of such a problem. It involved two of the most outstanding servants of Christ – Paul and Barnabas. John Mark, the nephew of Barnabas, was a bright, young Christian in the early church. He became one of the first missionaries with Paul and Barnabas. But he found the mission field a hard place and returned to Jerusalem. Paul felt Mark was unreliable because of this failure and refused to take him on his second missionary journey with Barnabas. So a disagreement between two great men of God arose. Was blood thicker than water, clouding the judgment of Barnabas with regard to his young nephew?

How often do we take the side of our children or those near us rather than being objective and “speaking the truth in love”? Many Christians need to learn that, in dealing with fellow Christians who are our relations, we have to be faithful to God's word rather than to family ties. “Faithful are the wounds of a friend” (Proverbs 27:6).

On the other hand, was Paul being too harsh and lacking in Christian compassion by not giving his young friend a second chance? We need to learn to give our fellow believers fresh opportunities when failure has occurred. God has been gracious to us – how gracious are we to each other? When our fellow believers turn to us for forgiveness and want to put things right, we must respond in grace, with open hands and hearts.

We may not know the rights and wrongs of the conflict between Paul and Barnabas. We know that Barnabas took John Mark to Cyprus and, by his pastoral care, helped his young nephew (Acts 15:39), so much so that, at the end of 2 Timothy, we see John Mark restored and Paul commends him with much affection as a useful servant of God. The conflict was eventually resolved. This is an important lesson. It takes time to heal rifts and we have to be patient and loving towards each other whilst confidence is being restored.

How many of us meet for fellowship with Christians still bearing grievances or grudges against those for whom Christ died? Let us resolve now to put right the conflicts which rob us of peace and power. By loving one another as Christ loved us, let us show to the world what it is to be true disciples of the Lord Jesus!

God has been gracious to us

Can God Suffer Pain?

Gordon Hughes

Much has been written on the problem of human pain and suffering. There are often no easy answers to that problem although the Bible does give some important insights. The pain suffered by God Himself is not often considered but has something to say to us in our pain.

Can God suffer pain? The answer to that question is ‘Yes, and He does’. At first sight, the idea of God suffering pain may seem strange. Some may think of God as distant and remote, far removed from the daily suffering which goes on in the world. The reality, of course, is that He is very much involved in, and cares about, all that goes on in His creation. The interrelationship of God and His creation is emphasised by Paul: “...the Son of His love...All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and by Him all things consist” (Colossians 1:13-17).

In looking at this interrelationship, we need to go back to man’s creation by God: “Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness” (Genesis 1:26). This important statement of the Godhead is vital to our appreciation of this interrelationship. While ‘image’ has to do primarily with representation and manifestation, ‘likeness’ must carry with it the thought of resemblance. We shall focus here on the idea of likeness.

It must readily be recognised that much of this likeness was lost when Adam and Eve sinned. Nevertheless, it is equally true that that likeness has not been totally lost by sin. The fact that man has a capacity to love, even though that capacity is frequently flawed, must be a reflection of the likeness of God, for “God is love” (1 John 4:8). It may well be that man’s capacity to suffer pain reflects God’s capacity also to suffer pain.

Man suffers pain because of the fall. God’s judgment on Eve was, “I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; in pain you shall bring forth children” (Genesis 3:16). God’s judgment on Adam was, “Cursed is the ground for your sake; in toil shall you eat of it all the days of your life...In the sweat of your face shall you eat bread” (Genesis 1:17-19). Man’s ability to suffer pain encompasses his whole being – body, soul and spirit. So we might distinguish physical pain, emotional pain, and spiritual pain. Physical pain is experienced, for example, when touching a hot object, through aching muscles, and in some illnesses. In some, though not all, cases, that pain reflects the loving care of the Creator for His creatures in giving them an inbuilt self-preservation mechanism. Who can doubt the emotional pain felt by David as he lamented the death of his rebellious son, Absalom: “O my son Absalom – my son, my son Absalom – if only I had died in your place! O Absalom my son, my son!” (2 Samuel 18:33). Paul makes known to the Philippians his intense spiritual pain: “For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ” (Philippians 3:18). Emotional pain and spiritual pain cannot be segregated into watertight compartments, and frequently unite.

“God is Spirit” (John 4:24). In that sense, God’s pain must be understood in terms of emotional and spiritual pain. However, the Lord Jesus, as perfect Man, fully experienced the physical pain which is the common lot of mankind.

It will be helpful, therefore, to look at some instances in Scripture of the pain of God.

Adam and Eve

We have already considered the judgment of God upon Adam and Eve for their sin and the pain that would be an inevitable consequence of that judgment. There was a further consequence: “Then the LORD God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of Us, to know good and evil. And now, lest he put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever” – therefore the LORD God sent him out of the garden of Eden to till the ground from which he was taken. So He drove out the man; and He placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life” (Genesis 3:22-24).

There could be no going back to Eden for Adam and Eve! But neither could there be any going back for God Himself! It has been aptly remarked that the pain which Adam and Eve felt on leaving Eden was only a pale reflection of the far greater pain in the heart of God. “Where are you?” was His question to Adam and Eve in the garden (Genesis 3:9). (In passing, that significant question is the first question addressed by God to man in Scripture.) That question was not asked because God did not know! He knew that they had hidden themselves. Rather it was asked so that Adam and Eve might realise how far they now were from God.

But for God there could now be no going back to those moments of “walking in the garden in the cool of the day” in communion with His creatures. Behind the question, “Where are you?” lies the deep sadness and pain of God that that precious fellowship had now been broken by man’s sin.

God’s deeper pain was not only reflected in the pain experienced by Adam and Eve, but also in the pain experienced by the rest of His creation. Romans 8 makes this clear: “The creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that *the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time*” (vv.20-22).

*A pale reflection of the far
greater pain in the heart of God*

Noah

“My Spirit shall not strive (or, plead with) man forever, for he is indeed flesh; yet his days shall be one hundred and twenty years” (Genesis 6:3). God was not indifferent to the sin and disobedience of His creatures. That statement of God on the wickedness that was rampant in Noah’s day plainly indicates His deep concern. But there was more than concern on God’s part: “And the LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart” (v.6). The flood that ensued was not an act of vindictive judgment but rather arose from the pain which was in God’s heart and which could not allow His creatures to go on living, as they did then, for several hundreds of years, ever learning new practices of evil and practising “man’s inhumanity to man”.

The nation of Israel

The prophet, Isaiah, repeatedly warned the nation of Israel, and the surrounding nations, of their departure from God and its inevitable consequences. Yet he writes in very moving terms of God’s deep concern for His people: “In all their affliction He was afflicted, and the Angel of His presence saved them; in His love and in His pity He redeemed them; and He bore them and carried them all the days of old” (63:9).

We may have smiled at the proverbial parent’s remark when punishing her or his child, “This hurts me more than it hurts you”. Those words may sometimes be true of some parents, as a reflection of that inbuilt likeness to God which we considered earlier. But those words are never more true than when applied to God Himself. Isaiah’s words indicate something of the pain which God felt in having to deal with His wayward children. Little wonder, then, that Isaiah earlier describes judgment as God’s strange work (28:21).

In passing, it is worth noting that the pains of His people are always shared by God, whether those pains arise as a result of His direct judgment or whether they are inflicted by others. That is best seen in the words of the Lord Jesus to Saul of Tarsus as he journeyed to Damascus to persecute the Christians there: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” (Acts 9:4). It is also seen in Isaiah’s own words prophesying the sufferings of the Lord Jesus: “Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows (literally, pains)” (53:4).

The prophet Hosea

The pain experienced by God is perhaps no more vividly portrayed than in the experiences of His servant, Hosea. Take time to read through the book of Hosea. God wanted to prepare Hosea to understand something of the pain that was in His heart. He told Hosea to go and marry a wife, who was already then, or would become, a prostitute. When the second child, a daughter, was born, we read, “Then God said to [Hosea], Call her name, Lo-Ruhamah (meaning ‘not having obtained mercy’), for I will no longer have mercy on the house of Israel, but I will utterly take them away”. Afterwards, a son was born. Then we read, “Call his name, Lo-Ammi (meaning ‘not My people’), for you are not My people, and I will not be your God”. Eventually, his wife

left Hosea and, as a slave, plied her sordid trade. Hosea was finally told to buy her back to himself. Who can imagine the inexpressible grief which all this would have caused this godly man, Hosea? Yet only in this way might Hosea begin to understand the grief and pain felt by God because of the unfaithfulness of His people.

Through Hosea, God asks two important questions, both of which vividly portray His deep pain. “O Ephraim, what shall I do to you? O Judah, what shall I do to you? For your faithfulness is like a morning cloud, and like the early dew it goes away” (6:4). The twice repeated question, “What shall I do?” is asked, not because of any lack of knowledge on the part of an omniscient God, but rather because of the deep pain He felt. Could He allow His people to go on flouting His holiness? But if He could not, how could He deliver them up to slavery in exile?

In passing, it is worth noticing that that question is very similar to that asked by the Lord Jesus just before the cross: “Now is My soul troubled, and *what shall I say?* ‘Father, save Me from this hour’? But for this cause came I to this hour. Father, glorify Your name” (John 12:27,28). Here was the One of whom the people had “marvelled at the gracious words that proceeded out of His mouth” (Luke 4:22). Again, the question reveals not a lack of knowledge but rather the deep pain of the Lord Jesus as He faced the choices before Him. Could He go back to heaven without going to the cross? But that could not have restored the glory of God (Psalm 69:4), the glory which had been trampled underfoot by man. It would also have meant going back alone, without His Church, His Bride. Yet to go to the cross meant not only the physical pain of crucifixion but the awfulness of abandonment by God as our sin-bearer.

The second question posed by God through Hosea is, “How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I set you like Zeboiim? My heart churns within Me; My sympathy is stirred” (11:8). (note: Admah and Zeboiim were close by Sodom and Gomorrah and presumably shared in their destruction.) Here, such is the intensity of God’s feelings that the question “How can I?” is repeated four times. Again, the deep pain of God is felt in those words, “How can I give you up?” Yet, in the wonderful love of God, just because He would not give up sinful man, you and me, to eternal destruction, we read, “[God] who did not spare His own Son, but *delivered Him up* for us all” (Romans 8:32). What a wonderful God we have!

How can I give you up, Ephraim?

The Lord Jesus

We have already touched briefly on the fact that the Lord Jesus, in His perfect humanity, laid Himself open to experience every kind of pain that we experience – physical, emotional and spiritual. We need to consider this in some detail. As we do so, let us heed the warning given by God to Moses, “Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground” (Exodus 3:5).

The Lord Jesus knew the physical pain of weariness and thirst (John 4:6,7). But above all these, He knew the pain of crucifixion, perhaps the cruellest form of execution known to man. Yet in His readiness to face this in its fullest expression, He refused the sour wine mingled with gall, traditionally given to those being crucified to deaden their pain (Matthew 27:33). W.Y.Fullerton expresses the sense of wonder each of us must feel as we look at such love:

I cannot tell how silently He suffered,
As with His peace He graced this place of tears,
Or how His heart upon the cross was broken,
The crown of pain to three and thirty years.

It is probably more difficult to distinguish the emotional and spiritual pains experienced by the Lord Jesus. In Him, they were both perfectly blended. He could not look upon the multitudes in their needs without feeling and sharing in their pain: “But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd” (Matthew 9:36). It is interesting that the words ‘moved with compassion’ are used to describe the Lord no fewer than four times (see also Matthew 14:14; Mark 1:41; 6:34). His was not just a sense of pity but a suffering love that moved Him to action, cost what it may (see Luke 8:46).

There was a time when many of those who had followed the Lord Jesus “went back and walked with Him no more”. That the Lord felt the pain of such abandonment is evident in His question to the twelve, “Do you also want to go away?” Peter’s answer must have cheered His aching heart, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Also we have come to believe and know that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (John 6:66-69).

That sense of pain is clearly seen in Him as He foresaw the destruction which must eventually come to faithless Jerusalem: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!” (Matthew 23:37).

There shall be no more pain

But the distress of the multitudes, desertion by His followers, rejection by Jerusalem – the pains which these brought to the Lord cannot begin to compare with the spiritual pain experienced by the Lord at Calvary. Even in the Garden of Gethsemane, the Lord's distress as He contemplated the fact of being made sin for us, and the consequent abandonment by God, was so great that "being in agony, He prayed more earnestly. And His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground" (Luke 22:44). We reverently worship as we listen to His words, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matthew 27:46). The emotional and spiritual pain of Calvary must have added immeasurably to the physical pain we considered earlier.

Lord Jesus, our Redeemer,
What pains, what suffering sore,
Were borne by Thee in patience
To save us evermore!

Lessons for us

In summary, we can say:

1. While God shares in the pain which is the common lot of mankind, His people especially give Him pain by their disobedience and unfaithfulness. For us as believers, the biblical expression 'the fear of the Lord' must include that reverential love that fears to give Him pain.
2. The Lord Jesus fully enters into our pain. Because He has experienced pain, He is fully able to share in its burden. "For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathise with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:15,16). What tremendous encouragement there is for us in those words!
3. There is a day coming when God, who has suffered pain for too long now, will totally do away with it: "And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying; and *there shall be no more pain*, for the former things are passed away" (Revelation 21:4). Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Lessons From Ezra

Part 6: Ezra's resource (ch.9)

Ted Murray

His disciples felt the need to say to the Lord Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray." In the Old Testament, we are privileged to listen in, as it were, to the prayers of three great servants of God, Ezra, Nehemiah and Daniel. We can learn much of blessing for ourselves today from these prayers.

There are many similarities between Nehemiah ch.9, Daniel ch.9 and this chapter but comparisons are not the subject before us here. The important features of this chapter are the disappointment, the resolve and the resources of Ezra. Here is a man who "through the good hand of God", with his companions, had just safely completed an extremely arduous journey. Faithfulness and dependency on the Lord were their hallmark. At the end of ch.8, they had offered to God their burnt offering in thanksgiving for His goodness. They would be on 'a spiritual high'.

What a disappointment it must have been, then, for Ezra when he was suddenly confronted with the state of things in Jerusalem, God's centre! Well might he be astonished (v.3)! He had come to Jerusalem expecting to find things different from those he had left behind in Persia. He expected to find a people who were obedient to the word of God and who were faithful in His service, who had separated themselves from the defilement that was around them, and who were thankful for the way God had preserved them through the captivity.

Today the church is faced with similar problems which are largely man-made, basically reflecting a lack of obedience to God's word. Our thoughts, and what we think to be most expedient, often prevails in assembly life, home life, and work life – those three important spheres of life that the Apostle Paul addresses in his letter to the Colossians. Do we, as we look around today, experience sadness when we see believers happily doing what is contrary to God's word, or do we go on as if there is nothing to be concerned about?

"The position of gathering to the name of the Lord in simplicity as members of the one Body is not one in which there is no trouble. Far from it! But it is the place where all trouble can be set right and every difficulty met by the word of God alone; this cannot be said of any sect in Christendom" (H.A. Ironside). Ezra was concerned about the situation facing him. Ch.9 shows us many attributes of his that we could well emulate.

The listening man

In vv.1,2 we see Ezra as the listening man. The princes inform him of the amalgamations of the people, the Levites, and the priests with the nations around.

Ezra did not say to the princes, “I have no time. This is your problem; deal with it yourselves.” Today, we live at a pace unique in this world’s history. Because of this and the consequent emphasis on materialism (time is money), there is a need for believers to make time to listen to the problems of others. This could also be used to bridge the distance between believers and unbelievers in this needy world.

This ability to listen does not give license to be a busybody (1 Timothy 5:13). Ezra did not go around looking for problems. That grave problem was brought to him. Israel had been instructed concerning their relationships with the nations surrounding them (see Exodus 34:10-16). The church today also has instructions as to relationships with this world. We should not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers (2 Corinthians 6:14). This applies socially as well as intimately. Believers have been led astray by having leisure and professional links with unbelievers.

The affected man

As Ezra listened, he was very much affected by what he heard. He could easily have said, “This is no concern of mine. I’ve just arrived in Jerusalem”, and left the problem to the locals to deal with and put right. But no! In v.3, we find Ezra deeply distressed. He sat down astonished! The root cause of the conditions prevailing in Jerusalem went right back to the time of Esau, who took wives from among the Canaanites (Genesis chs.27,28). Numbers ch.25 is a vivid reminder of this recurring problem. Prior to the captivity, it had become such a chronic problem that the only remedy was drastic judgment from God. The people of Israel had endured 70 years in exile as a result of the idolatry which the mixed marriages had brought upon them. Sadly, that same problem appears here again.

Some of the leaders had turned a blind eye to the evil; others had either participated in it or condoned it. But some were deeply concerned by it. We may not have to contend with this particular problem today, but there are others, equally serious, which face us. How are we affected by them? Are we like some of those who participated, condoned or turned a blind eye? Or are we also deeply concerned by them? Ezra was so much affected that he tore his clothes and plucked out some of his hair. Others could see his concern. He was affected physically by the sad state of affairs prevalent in Jerusalem – he had to sit down (v.3). We, too, need to be equally concerned at what is going on in the church today.

The conspicuous man

In v.4, we read that the contrite of the people assembled unto Ezra. They came to God’s man of the moment. He would be very conspicuous there, sitting in the street with his torn garments in obvious distress. This was the man whom God had just used to bring another group of Jews safely from Babylon with a vast amount of treasure for the temple. What a sight he must have been! This vista of God’s servant, Ezra, reminds us of another Man who was conspicuous. Pilate said to the crowd, “Behold the man!”

Those who trembled at the words of ... God

(John 19:5). But the crowd cried, “Away with Him”. There gathered around Ezra those who “trembled at the words of the God of Israel” (v.5). We can thank God that even today there are those who reverently fear the Lord and who gather together unto Him.

The people in Ezra’s day realised the seriousness of the situation around them and identified themselves with Ezra. Are we aware of the situation around us and what are we doing about it? Ezra sat astonished until the evening sacrifice, having fasted all day. God still says, “To this man will I look, even to him that is poor (or, humble) and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word” (Isaiah 66:2). Do these qualities characterise us, or are we, like some in the profession of Christianity, unaffected by that which is abhorrent to God and who actually condone and promote wanton sin because it is prevalent in today’s society? God forbid that it be so!

The overcoming man

Ezra got up at the time of the evening sacrifice (v.5). That evening sacrifice, the burnt offering, reminds us of the death of our Lord. It was that which fully delighted and satisfied the heart of God. In Ezra’s day, it looked on to the Lord’s death. Ezra knew that this was the time and place where relationships with God were both made and restored.

Ezra knew that he alone could do little about the situation. He realised the value of communion with God. He remembered his journey from Ahava and the way God’s hand had been over them in that perilous journey. He falls to his knees and spreads out his hands before the Lord (v.5). Ezra knew where his resources lay. They were in God! “Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?” (1 John 5:5). Ezra brings his problem to the Lord and tells Him about it. We have that same resource and are encouraged to bring our problems to the Lord instead of trying by ourselves to sort them out.

The confessing man

Vv. 6,7 depict Ezra’s deep sorrow and his confession of sin to God, though himself personally blameless. The failure of the people to separate themselves to God could not be laid at Ezra’s door. He had only just arrived and been told of the behaviour of the people of the land. He does not stand aghast at the wrong as though it was nothing to do with himself, but identifies with that wrong and makes it his confession.

He was too ashamed to lift up his face towards the Lord. In his prayer, he tells the Lord how he saw the situation. He says, “Our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has grown up to the heavens.” What a situation! There seemed to be no way out. That was not all. Ezra goes further back into history and confesses that this sin went right back to “the days of our fathers”.

We, too, live in a day of failure but often behave as though we are unaffected by it. Church history teaches us that there was failure from the beginning. The Lord had to charge the church at Ephesus with leaving their first love (Revelation 2:1-7). We do not find in Scripture or secular history that full recovery ever took place. Today, in this day of breakdown, we need to emulate Ezra, being concerned and ashamed of the current conditions, identifying with them and confessing them before the Lord.

The appreciative man

In the next two verses, Ezra appreciates the grace of God: “And now for a little while grace has been shown from the LORD our God” (v.8). Here we are reminded how God had showed His unmerited love and kindness to a wayward people. Ezra recalls that they were but a remnant – “a peg in His holy place”. Isaiah 22:23 reminds us of “a peg in a secure place”, that which could be relied upon – Christ Himself. Isaiah’s prophecy looks on to the time when the Lord will be glorified here on earth in the nation He had chosen. In the grace of God, a partial fulfilment had taken place in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah. God’s people had returned to Jerusalem; the temple had been rebuilt; worship was once more taking place.

Today, in this day of breakdown, we can also have a similar assurance that a nail has been put in a secure place. Truths, such as the personal return of the Lord for His church, once lost have been re-established; privileges once denied have been restored. We can enjoy the simplicity of gathering unto the Lord’s name and functioning as kings and priests unto God.

Ezra appreciated what God had done for His people. He refers to God’s mercy in freeing them from slavery, and being once more established in Judea and Jerusalem (v.9). We, too, need to appreciate all that the Lord has done for us. We have, in Christ, far more than Israel had in Ezra’s day but we may not always appreciate our blessings and privileges. Let us realise the wonder and the greatness of the truth that has been passed down to us. When we do, blessing will follow.

The remembering man

In vv.10-12, Ezra remembers the commandments of the Lord and admits that Israel has forsaken them. During his day of sitting astonished, Ezra would have had ample time to go over the instructions given by God to Moses. God had stated that the land was polluted by idolatry, full of abominations and totally unclean. Strict instructions had been given to the Israelites about relationships and the need to keep the inheritance pure.

Are we contaminated by the spirit of the age?

Do we remember what we were taught regarding the things of the world and being unequally yoked to it? Are we contaminated by the spirit of the age and prepared to let things slide? Like Ezra, we need to look around and see the confusion that surrounds us. Then let us ask the Lord to show us what part we can play in it. The testimony is almost broken down and in a very weak state. But recovery is possible! Our part is to be wholly separated unto the Lord, to be faithful to His word, and to serve Him here in maintaining the testimony and promoting the glorious Gospel of God. Ezra remembered the old paths and sought to walk in them. We should follow his example.

The responsible man

We see this characteristic in vv.13,14. Ezra acknowledges the failure and identifies himself with it. What a lesson for us today! We are often ready to see faults and failures in other groups of Christians, behaving like the Pharisees did, when we should be contrite before God. Each Christian is part of the Christian testimony in the world. Ezra, in spite of having just arrived in Jerusalem, accepted the blame and the guilt of his fellow Israelites. We, too, need to accept responsibility for our part in the breakdown we see around us and the shame which that has brought to the testimony of the church. We have in Christ great privileges, but we also have equivalent responsibilities. Failure to realise our responsibilities will cause further harm to the testimony.

Ezra recognises in his prayer that God had dealt graciously with His people, despite their great failure. In this day of breakdown, we too can still see God's hand of grace bestowing blessing upon a church that, from its earliest days, has brought shame to her blessed Lord. In Revelation 3:14-22, we see the Lord's judgment on the church's failure, but we also see His wondrous grace: "If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me." In v.2, we are instructed "to strengthen the things which remain" and in 2:25 to hold fast what we have until the Lord comes.

Let us take up the challenge and the responsibility of these exhortations. When we come together, it will then be with ready and prepared hearts so that our worship of the Lord will flow freely and not be constrained by undue coldness and silence. Let's

show something of Ezra's character in our day. If we do not, the Lord has a right to take away our lampstand (Revelation 2:5).

The contrite man

In the last verse of the chapter, we read of Ezra's deep contrition. We get a real sense of the shame and sorrow that he was enduring: "O LORD God of Israel, You are righteous, for we are left as a remnant, as it is this day. Here we are before You, in our guilt, though no one can stand before You because of this". All that is left for Ezra and that remnant is the mercy of that righteous God. Let us ever remember these attributes of the Lord our God!

On Mars Hill, Paul reminds the Athenians that in God "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). God is central to our being. Though we know Him as our Father, let us always remember His supremacy, that He is righteous, that He is Just, and that He abhors sin. We must never become familiar in our dealings with Him. Our relationship with Him started at Calvary's cross, that place where, as individuals, we were contrite for our sins. That was where we found forgiveness, rest and peace. In His grace, He has given a place of nearness and security. We need to express our gratitude with thanksgiving and praise.

Let us, like Ezra, accept the responsibility of the failure around us and cast ourselves on the Lord's mercy and grace.

Strengthen the things which remain

Erratum

The statement on p.2 of the October issue, "Here we are left in doubt..." should, of course, have read, "Here we are left in no doubt..." We are sorry for any confusion this may have caused.

Editor

What Does the Bible Say About...?

7. Worship

John Keable



The picture of a seeking Saviour is familiar (Luke 15:3-7; 19:10). The seeking Father is, perhaps, less familiar but equally important. So the Lord Jesus reminds us, “The hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him” (John 4:23). This article should help start off your thinking on this important subject.

Mention ‘worship’ and one usually thinks about singing, praying, and the breaking of bread. Some churches have special “praise and worship” meetings; others begin meetings with a “time of worship” leading on to a “time of teaching or ministry”.

Is worship just for our times in church or assembly meetings? Is it something we can do alone, or do we have to be in a group? What is worship?

Giving to God

The first mention of ‘worship’ in the Bible concerns Abraham and Isaac. In Genesis 22:5, Abraham tells his servants, “Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. *We will worship* and then we will come back to you.” This is interesting because, on this occasion, there was no singing; in fact, Abraham probably had a very heavy heart. He was on his way to sacrifice his only son to God.

Worship, then, does not have to include singing; it is primarily giving something to God. When we consider what

great gifts He has given us, and the greatest of all was the gift of His only Son, surely our desire must be to give something back to Him.



Adam and Eve must have taught their sons the value of worship, although the word ‘worship’ is not expressly connected with them in the Bible. In Genesis 4, we see that Cain and Abel had learned to bring an offering to God of

their livelihood. (Although Cain's offering was not acceptable, the principle of giving the best to God is evident.)

Praising God

Isaac was not sacrificed but was saved by God's provision of a ram. The second reference to worship in the Bible concerns Abraham's servant and his search for a wife for Isaac.

On finding himself among Abraham's relatives, the servant "*bowed down and worshipped the LORD*, saying, "Praise be to the LORD, the God of my master Abraham"" (Genesis 24:26,27). Here, the unnamed servant expresses his gratitude to the Lord for His protection and guidance during a long journey and his quest on behalf of Abraham.

Worship, then, is also an expression of our appreciation for God's goodness to us. How often, when we go on a journey, do we commit ourselves to Him for safekeeping? How often do we thank Him when we arrive safely? Real worship is born out of a grateful heart.

*Worship
is born
out of a
grateful
heart*

Worship by command



At first sight, it may seem strange to associate worship with commandment. Surely, worship should be spontaneous. Yet all through the Old Testament, we read of commandments to worship the Lord. The Israelites were told, "Place the basket before the LORD your God and *bow down before Him*" (Deuteronomy 26:10). The basket in question contained ten per cent of the produce accumulated; it had to be the first and best of the crop. Our God deserves the best of our time, our money, and our possessions.

Psalm 95:6 exhorts us to "*bow down in worship*, let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker". Psalm 96:9 tells us to "*worship the LORD* in the splendour of His holiness; tremble before Him, all the earth". God expects His creation to acknowledge Him as LORD and Maker. Every creature on earth owes its very existence to God. Sad to say, most do not acknowledge this and some deny His very existence. Those of us who do know and love the Lord realise how much we owe Him. When did we last tell Him that?



In Spirit and in Truth

When passing through Samaria one day, the Lord Jesus had a discussion with a woman about worship. (It is noteworthy that the Lord did not have this discussion in Jerusalem with an educated man like Nicodemus, but here with this outcast woman.) The Lord Jesus explained that God wants us to “worship in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24). We have sometimes explained this away and excused ourselves of any practical responsibility to worship. “As we are to worship in spirit and in truth,” we say, “it is all about what happens in the heart.” This is quite true, but what happens in the heart must have an effect in our lives! In Romans 12:1, Paul writes, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – which is your *spiritual [act of] worship*”.

*Worship
in spirit
and in
truth*



It is no good going to church, having a good old sing-song and then coming home believing we have “done our bit for God”. True worship, spiritual worship will be an active part of our lives twenty four hours a day, seven days a week. We are a people loved by God and bought by the blood of Jesus. Of all people in the world, we have cause and reason to worship Him in spirit and in truth – to give Him all we have and to continually praise Him for His goodness.

“To Him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb, be praise and honour and glory and power, for ever and ever!” (Revelation 5:13).

If you want to know more about this subject, read “The True Worship” by J.S. Blackburn, a former editor of Scripture Truth. This spiritual classic is available from Scripture Truth, price £3.95 plus postage and packing.

Lessons from Isaiah ch.40 for Today

Part 4. vv.9-26

Mark Davison

As we have seen earlier in this series, Isaiah ch.40 strikes a note of comfort and hope after the solemn judgments of the previous chapters. In the midst of your despair, take to heart this message of comfort and hope as you read this article.

Context

We need to remind ourselves of the context in which these words were originally spoken by Isaiah. Over the previous 800 years, God had brought His people, the Hebrews, out of slavery in Egypt, had led them across the wilderness and had given them a land of their own. He had helped them to conquer the land, and had blessed them in it. Indeed, such was the closeness of the relationship between God and His people, that it is often described as a marriage – with Israel (pictured here as Jerusalem) as the bride.

Sadly, however, far from behaving as a bride, Israel had acted more like a prostitute (see the book of Hosea). Time and again, they had taken false gods (idols, statues, etc.) and worshipped them. On other occasions, instead of relying on God alone, they had forged political alliances with the heathen nations around them, hoping that this would bring them a measure of safety and protection. In short, they had frequently ignored God. As a consequence, Isaiah foretold to King Hezekiah (see ch.39) the exile of the people because of their rebellion over these many centuries.

The slavery itself was still future, but ch.40 looks beyond that to a time when Babylon has been defeated. It speaks of comfort (v.1), hope (v.5), care (v.11), strength (v.29), and energy (v.31). All of these, God would give to His people again. The whole purpose of this was to give them a sense of hope that all was not lost. The God who still loved them would bring them through.

We might well imagine the words of v.27 to be those of the people as they endure exile in Babylon: “Why do you say, O Jacob, and complain, O Israel, “My way is hidden from the LORD; my cause is disregarded by my God?” Perhaps the words were spoken by the few poor folk left behind in Judah after Nebuchadnezzar had devastated Jerusalem. The people are down and despondent. “That’s all very well,” they seem to say, “But can God be

God... would bring them through

trusted? Is God *able* to do it? Is God *willing* to do it? And if so, *when* will God do it?” Perhaps some of them were becoming embroiled in the religious practices of Babylon itself, and wondering if they had a better chance of rescue from there than from the God of their fathers.

Is God able?

Verses 12-26 are a series of rhetorical questions, asked for effect and not expecting answers. They are designed to drive away any doubts the people might have over the ability and the willingness of God.

Take v.12 as an example: “Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens? Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket, or weighed the mountains on the scales and the hills in a balance?” Here we see that God is *overwhelmingly great*. How much water can you hold in your hand? Perhaps if you cup your hands together you might be able to hold a small amount, but it is difficult to stop it from seeping away. God, by contrast, has measured all the waters of the earth in His hands! What a marvellous fact this is, especially when we remember that two-thirds of the earth’s surface is covered by water! The span of my hand is some 20cm., but God has measured the heavens with the breadth of His hand! I can carry a few groceries, but God has held the dust of the earth in a basket! Finally, God has weighed the mountains and hills in scales, whereas you and I can only manage some flour for a cake! To realise that the God whom we know is so great must produce a sense of awe in us.

Secondly, we are told that God *cannot be compared to any other*. “To whom, then, will you compare God? What image will you compare him to?” (v.18). If the people conclude that they cannot trust God, whom then can they trust? Over the past years, the people had put their trust in the nations around, but see what God says about them in vv.15,22. Then there are the sacrifices offered by the people: surely God would be pleased with them. After all, He had instituted the sacrificial system in the first place. But see what He says in v.16: “Lebanon is not sufficient for altar fires, nor its animals enough for burnt offerings.” God would not be placated, even if they offered all the animals of Lebanon (a very fertile area), burning them on the mighty cedars of Lebanon.

Why would God not accept their sacrifices? Samuel’s message to Saul gives us the answer: “Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams” (1 Samuel 15:22). Israel’s sacrificial rites were carried out only out of habit, with no real honesty behind them. They had forgotten the true reason for those sacrifices.

And what about the false gods to which they had turned? God shows the folly of such practices in vv.18-20: “As for an idol, a craftsman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and fashions silver chains for it. A man too poor to present such an offering selects wood that will not rot. He looks for a skilled craftsman to set up an idol that will not topple.” How debasing for the people of God to bow down to an image of a pig or a cow!

All these things – the help of other nations, sacrifices, idols – had been tried by the Jews in the past and had failed them. All had proved useless. No, to compare God to anything else, all of which He has created, is to limit God. But God keeps asking the question which we have already seen in v.18 and now again in v.25: “‘To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?’” says the Holy One” (literally, ‘Holy keeps saying’). This is the ‘Holy One’ – the One who is superior to all others, unassailable in all His moral perfection.

Today, whilst there are in our country man-made idols such as are described here, we are more likely to be distracted by another type of idol. Harry Blamires (a student of C.S.Lewis) writes, “We live in what is in effect a society with many gods, in what we give ourselves to with varying degrees of what we can only call idolatry, to the service of money-making, career making, power grabbing, food, drink, fashion, entertainment, cars, gambling, sex, (*and football?*) and so on...they are getting excessive attention. As objects of concern, they are attracting the kind and degree of human response more proper in the religious sphere.” These are the things which are more likely to cause us to stray from God in our modern society.

Lastly, we see that God *has wisdom to match His power*. Power without wisdom leads to tyranny, but there is always perfect balance with God. Vv.13,14 show us that God did not need a working party to create the world: “Who has understood the Spirit of the LORD, or instructed him as his counsellor? Whom did the LORD consult to enlighten him, and who taught him the right way? Who was it that taught him knowledge or showed him the path of understanding?” Such is God’s wisdom that He was sufficient in Himself to complete His perfect creation.

Is God willing?

V.27 shows us that the people were feeling neglected. Maybe they did not question God’s ability to act. They had, after all, seen His power in action when He took them into captivity. But is He willing to act for them now, and rescue them? To bring the application home to ourselves, we could insert in v.27 the italicised words: “Why do you say, O Jacob, and complain, O Israel, (*and grumble, O Christian*), “My way is hidden from the LORD; my cause is disregarded by my God?”” These people had lost sight of God’s purposes and, as a consequence, they were wearily stumbling their way around. They had forgotten that God rescues those who hope in Him (v.31). Many of us, at times, feel this way. We need to read again vv.28-31, and take encouragement from the promise of God’s help if we remain faithful to Him. “Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall;

God rescues those who hope in Him

but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.”

When He gave His only begotten Son to be the Saviour of the world, God demonstrated beyond doubt His willingness to come to our rescue. Surely we cannot doubt His willingness still to support us! Furthermore, v.26 shows us that God is interested in each one individually, and not just in the totality of mankind. He even has names for each of the stars. How much more will He care for us His children (see Matthew 10:30)!

When will God do it?

If then, God is able, and He is willing, when will He come in and rescue us? The people of Isaiah's day were probably looking for a repeat of the exodus which had miraculously brought them out of slavery in Egypt. They would remember the psalms which had been sung daily in the temple in Jerusalem before their exile. The message which comes clearly through these psalms is that of waiting on God: “Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him; do not fret when men succeed in their ways, when they carry out their wicked schemes...those who hope in the LORD will inherit the land” (Psalm 37:7,9). Israel's return from exile began after some 70 years, and they drifted back to Jerusalem over a period of a century. Even then, however, they were somewhat half-hearted in their reconstruction of it. A reading of Ezra and Nehemiah shows how many times they were discouraged.

The real answer to their plea comes much later in their history, however. In a previous article, we saw from Luke 3:2-6 that the prophecy of v.3 in our chapter refers to John the Baptist. The God whom we read of in this chapter is no less than the One revealed as Jesus Christ in the New Testament (to confirm this view, we know that the Creator spoken of in this chapter is identified as the Lord Jesus in Colossians 1:16). He was the One who came to rescue His people, not in the sense of destroying their earthly enemies as they expected, but rather to rescue them from their life of constant sin and rebellion against God. Thus God's judgment would be turned away from them. In His death on the cross, all their sin was paid for (see v.2).

Waiting is one of the hard things of the Christian life, particularly as we now live in an ‘instant’ and ‘disposable’ world. But we can take heart from the psalmist: “Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD” (Psalm 27:14).

Conclusion

V.28 opens with: “Do you not know? Have you not heard?” These people knew from their past experience and history that God is everlasting, that He is the Creator, tireless, the all-wise One who is beyond understanding – and we know it too! But we, like them, need reminding again of these things. Surely God is able to keep us, as He promised Israel: “He tends his flock like a shepherd. He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young” (v.11). Even when it might seem humanly impossible, He is most certainly willing to do so. The question remains for each one of us, therefore, are we willing to hope in Him?

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A New Year Prayer

“And they glorified God in me”

Galatians 1:24

Father, let me dedicate
All this year to Thee,
In whatever worldly state
Thou wilt have me be:
Not from sorrow, pain, or care,
Freedom dare I claim;
This alone shall be my prayer,
“Glorify Thy name.”

If in mercy Thou wilt spare
Joys that yet are mine;
If on life, serene and fair,
Brighter rays may shine:
Let my glad heart, while it sings,
Thee in all proclaim,
And, whate'er the future brings,
“Glorify Thy name.”

If Thou callest to a cross,
And its shadow come,
Turning all my gain to loss,
Shrouding heart and home;
Let me think how Thy dear Son
To His glory came,
And in deepest woe pray on,
“Glorify Thy name.”

Lawrence Tuttiett

“...that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ”

1 Peter 4:11