

Scripture Truth

Bethany

The Gospel in Job

Lessons from James

Power for Christian Living

A Look at Nehemiah for Today

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Bethany

Donald Davison

Bethany might not have won an award for best kept village, if such had been available. But it occupied a special place in the Lord's affections because of the people who lived there. Their lives still challenge us today.

No village is of greater interest to the reader of Scripture than the village of Bethany since it is the place where our Lord spent the nights of His last week upon earth in the homes and company of those who knew and loved Him. Each night, after a busy day teaching in the Temple, He chose to travel the two miles back to Bethany rather than remain in Jerusalem.

'Bethany' means 'house of dates'. It has also been translated as 'house of affliction (or response)'. The connection with the date palm, with its provision of sweetness, food and shelter, speaks of rest, rejoicing and victory. But there is also the suggestion of deep sorrow. These are all features which we find in connection with the Lord and His association with this village. It will be convenient to look at four different incidents which took place in, or around, Bethany.

Service and sitting (Luke 10:38-42)

The contrast is often made between Martha being "cumbered about much serving" (v.40) and Mary who "sat at Jesus' feet, and heard his word" (v.39). It must first be stated that, while Martha comes in for some gentle reproof from the Lord at this time, it is first recorded of her that she "received him into her house" (v.38). This tells us something of the nature and disposition of this woman who would put her resources at the Lord's disposal during the time of His earthly pathway, when there was "no home on this earth for the dear Son of God, nowhere to lay His head".

It is a great privilege to be able to open our homes to the Lord and His people. Even if we are living under someone else's roof, we can still open our hearts to Him. So it is recorded of Lydia that she first opened her heart to the Lord and then her home to Paul and Silas, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house, and abide there" (Acts 16:13-15).

Every Christian ought to want to serve the Lord in whatever way He chooses and enables. Martha was like this. Her problem was that, in her serving, it was 'Martha' who got in the way. She exclaims, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left *me* to serve alone? Bid her therefore that she help *me*". So with us also, many times it is 'me' who gets in the way and hinders pure, unremitting service to the Lord. Christ and His interests must be the sole object of our service for Him.

Mary "sat at Jesus' feet, and heard his word". In each Scripture in which she is mentioned, Mary is always found at the feet of Jesus. Here, she listens to His word. In John 11:32, after the death of her brother, Lazarus, "she fell down at [Jesus'] feet". And in

John 12:3, she “anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped his feet with her hair”. Do we, too, know what it is to be at the feet of Jesus?

Low at Thy feet, Lord Jesus,
This is the place for me.
Here I have learned deep lessons,
Truths that have set me free.

Martha was occupied with her serving; Mary with her Lord and His word. Martha was occupied with what she was doing for Him; Mary with what the Lord was doing for her.

Mary was listening to His word. It is by that same word that we, too, are born again, cleansed, fed, built up, and learn from Him and about Him. His word is “a lamp unto [our] feet, and a light unto [our] path” (Psalm 119:105). So the apostle Paul, as he bade farewell to the elders at Ephesus, could think of no greater blessing than to say, “I commend you to God, and to *the word of his grace*, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified” (Acts 20:32).

Death and resurrection (John 11:1-44)

We are now introduced to another member of the family who lived in Bethany: Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary. This familiar tale is one of sickness and death, but also of the tender sympathy of the Lord and His mighty power. The two sisters know to whom to turn in their need. They send the Lord Jesus a message, “Lord, behold, he whom thou lovest is sick” (v.3). Do we instinctively turn to the Lord when faced with the problems of life? The words should encourage us to take “everything to God in prayer”, being assured of the Lord’s love, of His interest in and His personal affection for each of us.

The Lord does not go to them immediately. In the meantime, Lazarus dies and all hope seems to be lost. We have the benefit of hindsight. The sisters did not have this and, no doubt, had looked earnestly each day for the Lord to come. We, however, are let into the secret by the Lord Himself as to why Lazarus was allowed to die: “This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby” (v.4). Because of the death of Lazarus, there was going to be a mighty demonstration in Bethany of the inherent power of life and resurrection resident in the Lord Himself.

Martha, active as usual, as soon as she hears that Jesus was coming, went and met Him. Mary “sat still in the house” (v.20) until such time as Martha says, “The Master is come, and calleth for thee” (v.28). Both sisters meet the Lord with the same words, “Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died” (vv.21,32). But both sisters are going to learn the Lord in a new way that day.

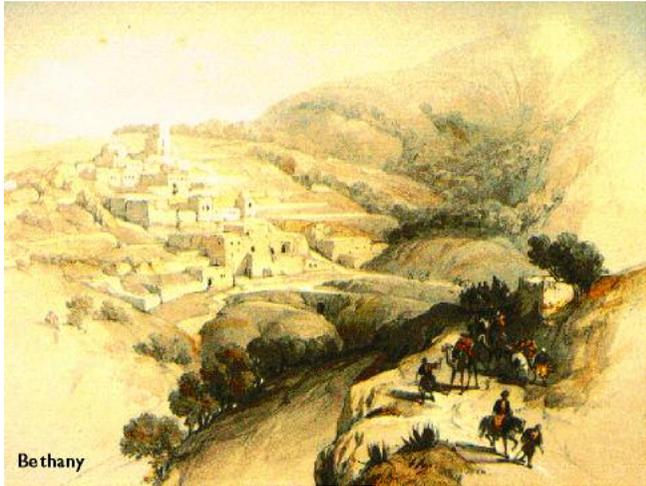
Martha knew of the truth of resurrection at ‘the last day’, but was not able to comprehend the answer the Lord gives her, “I am the resurrection, and the life” (v.25). Nor could she, for His answer was part of the successive revelation of Himself and all that

He is that came out in His life, and could only be fully understood after He died, was raised and glorified, and the Holy Spirit was given at Pentecost.

When we are bitten by a serpent, we need an antidote to counteract its effect. Sickness and death are in the world as a result of sin. The whole human race has been affected by the bite of the serpent so that the poison of sin and death is flowing through our veins. It is worse than that, for it is not only physical death the plagues the race, but spiritual death also. This second is even more serious than the first.

The Lord came to “undo the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8, JND trans.). Through His death and resurrection, the spheres both of physical and of spiritual death have been dealt with so that

already we are the possessors in our souls of eternal life. Should death intervene before the Lord returns, we know that, at His coming, our bodies will be raised and “clothed upon with our house which is from heaven” (2 Corinthians 5:2). The Lord’s statement, “I am the resurrection and the life”, is the guarantee of both these truths: res-



urrection is for the body, and life is for our souls. Our Lord Jesus Christ is the great antidote and remedy, counteracting and annulling the effects of sin and death for all who believe in Him.

The resurrection of our Lord is clearly and abundantly borne witness to throughout Scripture. It is found in the Old Testament, in the Gospels, the Acts, the epistles and in the Revelation, as can be seen below. It forms an essential part of the Gospel.

“For thou wilt not leave my soul in Hades; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption” (Psalm 16:10). This verse is quoted by Peter in his message to the Jews at Pentecost (Acts 2:27) and by Paul (Acts 13:35). Peter and Paul use this verse to prove conclusively the resurrection of our Lord Jesus.

In the Gospels, the Lord Himself said on the resurrection day, “Handle me and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have” (Luke 24:39).

In the epistles, 1 Corinthians 15 is the key chapter regarding the subject of resurrection. It contains the definitive statement: “But now *is* Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept” (v.20).

In the Revelation, we have the words of the Lord Himself, many years after He rose from the dead, to John who was “in the Spirit on the Lord’s day”: “Fear not; I am the first and the last: I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and death” (Revelation 1:17,18). To ‘have the keys’ gives power over, and authority to open something. In resurrection, the Lord Jesus has demonstrated His all-conquering power and authority over death which holds the body, and over hell (or hades, the place of departed spirits) which holds the souls of the departed. In death, the Lord Jesus broke the *power of sin*; in His resurrection, He has broken the *power of death*. As a consequence, sin and death are both defeated foes for the Christian. What a Saviour we have in the One who could say in resurrection, “All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth” (Matthew 28:18)!

Some important blessings flowing from the Lord’s resurrection are:

1. It is the proof that God has been glorified regarding the question of sin.
2. It is the proof that redemption has been accomplished.
3. It is the receipt placed in our hands showing that our debt has been paid in full.
4. It is the proof that Satan is a defeated foe.
5. It is the proof that death has been conquered.
6. Victory is assured for us because the Victim is now the Victor.
7. It is the grand proof and pledge that we will reach the bright glory of God and be with and like our Lord Jesus Christ throughout eternity.

After Jesus had wept with the sisters, and given thanks to His Father that He had been heard, the stone being taken away from the tomb, Jesus cries “with a loud voice, Lazarus, come forth. And he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with graveclothes: and his face was bound about with a napkin. Jesus saith unto them, Loose him, and let him go” (vv.43,44).

Several things need to be noted about this miracle:

1. Lazarus was beyond responding to human voices, but not beyond responding to the life-giving voice of the Son of God! The Gospels tell us of three people raised from the dead by the Lord Jesus.
2. Unless the Lord had specifically said, ‘*Lazarus*, come forth’, thereby limiting the call to Lazarus only, *all* who had died from righteous Abel up to that moment would have come forth!
3. Lazarus becomes a picture for us of what will take place at the moment of the Rapture: “The Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout” (1 Thessalonians 4:16). That will also be a specific and limited shout: “The *dead in Christ* shall rise first: then *we which are alive and remain* shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord” (vv.16,17). Believers only will hear and respond to this shout and rise to meet the Lord. Of unbelievers it is solemnly written, “The rest of the

dead lived not again until the thousand years were finished” (Revelation 20:5). Theirs will be a resurrection to judgment.

4. The Lord instructs those at the grave to “Loose [Lazarus], and let him go” (v.44). This is a job for the bystanders. Lazarus could not walk, work or talk. When a soul is brought spiritually from death unto life, it is our job to help bring them into liberty of soul and spirit in the presence of the Lord. Lazarus’ face was bound with a napkin. What a joy it is when we hear a new-born soul begin to praise and worship the Lord!

Service, communion and worship (John 12:1-3)

We come now to one of the happiest and sweetest incidents to take place in Bethany. Here were hearts that loved Him and had experienced in each of their lives His care for them. Yet the occasion is filled with poignancy also, for it is just a few days before His crucifixion.

“There they made him a supper” (v.2). What a privilege! What a voice to us! In this time of His rejection by the world, we still have the privilege to ‘make Him a supper’ each first day of the week, as He has requested us to do. His request on the night He was betrayed becomes binding on every true believer: “This do in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19). In making His request, He gives us something to do: ‘this do’; and Someone to remember: ‘in remembrance of Me’.



Here is something that each one of us can do for Him – answer to His request and remember Him in His death week by week. Do you do it? If not, why not? What a joy it is to do so! But it is a far greater joy to Him when He sees us responding in true praise, worship and adoration for what He has done for us!

Martha is now seen *servicing* without distraction. Happy and satisfied with her lot because of the resurrection of her brother, she now serves in the light of this. As we serve our risen Lord, we have the encouragement, “Knowing that of the Lord ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance: for ye serve the Lord Christ” (Colossians 3:24).

Lazarus sits at table with the Lord. This is a picture of our continual place of acceptance, fellowship and *communion* with the Lord. The greatest outward expression of our fellowship and communion with the Lord is seen in the remembrance of Him. But the true believer is in the wonderful position of belonging to “the fellowship of [God’s] Son” (1 Corinthians 1:9) always and at all times! This is the holy circle and sphere which is ours as being indissolubly linked to our Lord Jesus Christ.

An illustration of this is found in Mephibosheth (2 Samuel 9). Where do we find him in Jerusalem? David says to Ziba, “Mephibosheth thy master’s son shall eat bread always at my table...Mephibosheth dwelt in Jerusalem: for he did eat continually at the king’s table”. Both individually and collectively, we are in, and can enjoy, this place of blessing and privilege in communion with divine Persons.

Mary depicts for us the features of priestly *worship*. Her anointing of the feet of the Lord with “very costly” spikenard, shows that her whole being and affections were centred in Christ. No cost was too great for Him! Did she have some inkling that something momentous was soon to happen to her Lord?

Mary is found at the feet of Jesus again. She had the inestimable privilege of anointing those blessed feet that were shortly to be pierced and nailed to the cross of Calvary. For her, nothing was too great for the Lord. She bestows all her glory upon Him by wiping His feet with her hair, so ministering refreshment to His precious body and heart. In worship and communion with Him, we can also bring refreshment to His heart today.

“The house was filled with the odour of the ointment.” When true worship ascends to the Father and the Son, all are brought into and under its mighty, moving influence. But is this the only house to be ‘filled with the odour of the ointment’? Surely the Father’s house, too, is filled with the acceptable praises and worship of His people as the worth of His beloved Son is poured out unto Him from our redeemed hearts!

Blessing and ascension (Luke 24:50-53)

Here is the last view we have of events in Bethany. The Lord is leaving this earth for heaven. His desire expressed to His Father to be reinvested “with the glory which I had with thee before the world was” (John 17:5) is about to be realised.

“He led them out as far as to Bethany” (v.50). We, too, have been called out from this world and its attractions to be in a place of favour in the company of our rejected Lord and to be the recipients of His continual blessing.

“Having lifted up his hands, he blessed them” (v.50, JND trans.). What did the assembled disciples see? They saw those hands that had been lifted up in His sin bearing on the cross and still bore the marks of His suffering love for them. But now those same hands are lifted up in blessing upon them!

“It came to pass, while he blessed them, he was parted from them, and carried up into heaven” (v.51). Those blessed, nail-pierced hands were never lowered. The blessing of His own had begun. It has never finished! It never will, until the last saint is gathered in amongst the company of the redeemed, all taken to glory. And once there? Throughout the ages of eternity, we will be in a sphere of eternal love, life, light, glory and blessing!

What was the effect of all this upon the assembled disciples? “They worshipped HIM” (v.52). We, too, can have our part in this. Was worship only an occasional experience for them? No – “they...were *continually* in the temple, praising and blessing God” (v.53). This, too, can be our sweet employ now. It will be so throughout eternity when, with the vast company of the redeemed, we will join our voices in worship: “Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever” (Revelation 5:13).

Lessons from James

Part 2 – Chapter 2

George Stevens

Only God can see the saving faith in a Christian's heart. But every Christian needs to show the works of faith before men. The ever practical James highlights this important lesson for us today. This article is based on a talk given on London's Premier Radio.

Introduction

In James 1, we considered faith and trials; then faith and truth. In ch.2, we will find:

1. Faith and favouritism. This deals with favouring the rich above the poor and God's view of the rich and poor in general.
2. Faith and laws. Here we find the royal law of love; the law of God given by Moses; and the law of liberty that characterises believers today.
3. Faith and works. This section shows us that faith is revealed by works; faith is perfected by obedience; the significance of justification by works for the Christian.

Faith and favouritism (vv.1-7)

“My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons” (v.1).

In addressing his letter, “My brethren”, James emphasises the family aspect of the church and his own sharing in it with them all. He tells them that Christians should not show favouritism when assembled together. There is to be no difference made between the rich dressed in all his finery and the poor dressed in rags when they come into the assembly.

It was customary for the people in the Jewish synagogue to sit according to rank, with those of the same trade together. The introduction of this custom into Jewish Christian places of worship is here refused by James. Rather, he indicates that Christ is Lord of glory. As such, He provides both rich and poor Christians with glory because of their union with Him. The glory of Christ resting on a poor believer should make him to be regarded as highly by his fellow believers as his richer brother.

The Lord Jesus treated both rich and poor alike. The rich, like Nicodemus, were touched by the beauty of His Person, His compassionate works, and His authoritative teaching. Elders and doorkeepers of churches today should have the same qualities of Christ who said, “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden...” (Matthew 11:28-30). James rightly insists on no class distinction when believers are assembled



together. Today, we might add that there should be no age discrimination either, other than that which Scripture properly enjoins.

Those who did show prejudice were setting themselves up as judges of men. Sadly, they only proved themselves to be judges having evil reasonings. God alone knows the heart. Man tends to look only at the outward appearance.

Nevertheless, there is obvious spiritual distinction between rich and poor, in general, because James pleads with his beloved brethren to remember that it is the poor of this world that God has chosen to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom. He reminds them of the attitude of the rich in general to the things of God: “And [do not] they blaspheme the excellent name which has been called upon you?” James asks (v.7, JND trans.). Does this mean that God is prejudiced against the rich? By no means! God knows that the rich do not respond easily to His grace. The Lord Jesus said that it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God (Matthew

19:24). This is because so many rich people prefer to serve their riches to serving God. The world’s judgment of the poor contrasts with God’s. Those who despise or dishonour the poor despise the very ones whom God honours!

God’s kingdom is said to be “promised to them that love Him” (v.5). Many of those to whom James wrote would have dogmatically stated that the kingdom was promised to the Jew only. This was now seen to be an error. The kingdom is promised to those who love God, Jew and Gentile alike.

The rich Jew blasphemed the name of Christ, but God pronounces it a worthy name: “that worthy name by the which ye are called” (v.7). This seems to indicate that, when James wrote his epistle, the name ‘Christian’ had been commonly adopted since its first coining in Antioch (Acts 11:26). The poor were the objects of persecution not so much because they were poor, but because they were identified with Christ, and He was the object of the world’s hatred.

Faith and laws (vv.8-13)

“If indeed ye keep [the] royal law according to the scripture, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself, ye do well. But if ye have respect of persons, ye commit sin, being convicted by the law as transgressors” (vv.8,9, JND trans.). The favouring of one over another is not only contrary to the faith of Christ, as we have seen, but even to the law itself. In v.8, this is called the ‘royal’ or ‘kingly’ law. It is the one command that should be observed by every king who would reign in a godly manner. Any person who breaks that law



*God alone
knows
the heart*

stands convicted as a transgressor (vv.10,11).

God's law, as given by Moses, is like a chain. When one link (commandment) is broken, then the whole chain (law) is broken. If we do not love our neighbours as ourselves then we are guilty of breaking that law. But will we be judged by God as breaking the law given by Moses? The answer is, of course, "No!", the reason being that we are not under that law, but under grace (Romans 8:1-4). The Christian faces no judgment for sin because Christ bore that judgment on his behalf. Nevertheless, we shall stand before His judgment seat in a day to come (2 Corinthians 5:10). There our works for Him will be assessed and rewards presented.

In vv.12,13, James writes of the law of liberty: "So speak ye, and so act, as those that are to be judged by [the] law of liberty; for judgment [will be] without mercy to him that has shewn no mercy. Mercy glories over judgment". As Christians, we shall be judged on the basis of this 'law of liberty'. This is an expression which shows that God has revealed His will to us through Christ. The law of liberty, through God's mercy, frees us from the curse of the Old Testament law. We should be free, therefore, to love and obey willingly. We are responsible to show mercy.

If we will not in turn practise the royal law of love to our neighbour, that same law condemns us still more heavily than the old law, which spoke nothing but wrath to those who broke it. This takes us back to the treatment of "the poor man in vile raiment" (v.2). Such prejudice had



not been according to the mercy displayed in the Gospel. The leaders set themselves up as "judges of evil thoughts". By so doing, they were placing themselves under judgment. Divine mercy goes hand in hand with righteousness, and thereby it triumphs against the judgment that otherwise had been our due.

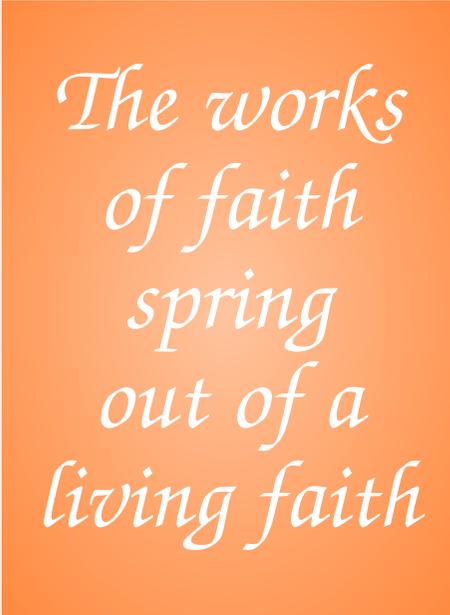
Faith and works (vv.14-26)

Here we see that faith is revealed by works. James poses the question: "What [is] the profit, my brethren, if any one say he have faith, but have not works? can faith save him?" (v.14, JND trans.). The question implies that true faith is a living thing which shows itself in works.

In vv.15,16, James teaches that faith should be seen in love: "Now if a brother or a sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one from amongst you say to them, Go in peace, be warmed and filled; but give not to them the needful things for the body, what [is] the profit? So also faith, if it have not works, is dead by itself". These words show the practical side to a living faith. This is more than faith that simply gathers to itself a certain knowledge of God. It involves faith witnessing to the loving kindness of God.

It must be noted that these works are the works *of* faith. That is to say, faith comes first. It is faith that makes a person a new creation, called to do good works. Romans chapters 3,4 confirm that we are justified by faith and not works (see also Galatians 3). The so-called good works of an unbeliever pursuing salvation are classed by God as “filthy rags” (Isaiah 64:6).

Paul writes of “the works of the law”. They are works done in obedience to the demands of the law given by Moses in order to gain a righteousness to bring someone into the blessing of God’s earthly kingdom. “This do, and thou shalt live”, said the Lord. But none of us is able to keep that law. We are all sinners by practice and are all sinful in nature. The law simply condemns us to death – for “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23).



*The works
of faith
spring
out of a
living faith*

Some comments of F.B.Hole are helpful: “The works of faith, of which James speaks, are those which spring out of a living faith as its direct impression and result. They are as much a proof of faith’s vitality as flowers and fruit prove the vitality and also the nature of a tree. If no such works are forthcoming, then our faith is proclaimed as dead, being alone”. If a person claims to be a Christian but his life does not exhibit any works that bring glory to God, then that person’s faith must be classed as dead. It is very questionable that the person is a believer at all. Works flowing *from* the faith that justifies are commanded by both James and Paul. Paul writes to Titus, “These things I will that thou affirm constantly, that they which have believed in God might be careful to maintain good works” (Titus 3:8). Note that the works are done by those who have already believed. Good works might be defined as selfless works done for the benefit of others and to the glory of God.

V.24 has been a problem to many: “Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only”. James’ words seem to contradict scriptures which teach us that we are justified by faith alone. On the one hand, we have Paul’s words, “If Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not before God” (Romans 4:2). But then James states, “Was not our Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar?” (2:21). How can these things be explained?

The answer lies in v.18 of our chapter: “But some one will say, Thou hast faith and I have works. *Show me thy faith with-*

out works, and I from my works will *shew thee my faith*" (JND trans.). Justification by faith alone is *before God* (Romans 4:2). Our faith is quite apparent to His all-seeing eye. Justification by works of faith is *before men* (James 2:18). Here we see that another believer may ask that we display our faith by our works, thus justifying ourselves and showing our faith to him.

The matter of believing in one God is raised: "Thou believest that God is one. Thou doest well. The demons even believe, and tremble" (v.19, JND trans.). Here James addresses an individual who believes there is one God. But James insists on a proper response to such faith. The demons believe in one God and hate Him! They cannot be saved – so they tremble. The individual who believes in one God should show his faith by acting in a godly manner. If there is no action or change in lifestyle accompanying faith, then James adds, "But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?" (v.20). If men are to see that a Christian's faith is real, then it must be characterised by obedience to God.

The key to works that reveal faith, then, is obedience to God. Such a Christian would have a keen interest in reading the Bible in order to discover the will of God. She or he would attend a Bible-believing church and have a genuine care for fellow believers. Her or his life would also display acts of faith. Two examples of such obedience are given by James in vv.21-25. The first is the obedience of Abraham. Abraham believed God when He promised that Abraham would become a great nation (Genesis 12). How did he show his belief? By his actions in leaving his

own family and country. God said that all the nations of the earth would be blessed in him (Genesis 18:18). He later promised,

"In Isaac shall thy seed be called" (Genesis 21:12). The promises of God to Abraham depended on Isaac living. Abraham knew that God would not break His promise. God then tested Abraham's faith by telling him to sacrifice Isaac (Genesis 22). Only as Abraham took the knife to kill Isaac did God step in and stay Abraham's hand. Abraham had trusted that God would have raised Isaac from the dead if he had been called upon to slay him: "...accounting that God was able to raise [Isaac] up, even from the dead" (Hebrews 11:19). Abraham's obedience to God in this trial was an amazing expression of his faith. Immediately after the offering, God confirmed His promises to Abraham: "...in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; *because thou hast obeyed my voice*" (Genesis 22:16-18).

The second example of this obedience of faith is Rahab, a Gentile woman of bad reputation: "But was not in like manner also Rahab the harlot justified on the principle of works, when she had received the messengers and put [them] forth by another way?" (v.25, JND trans.). The actions of Rahab in lodging and then hiding the Israelite spies showed that she had rejected the gods of her own





culture and now feared the might and mercy of the God of Israel. In her confession of faith to the spies, she stated, “I know that Jehovah has given you the land, and that the dread of you has fall-

en on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land faint because of you” (Joshua 2:9-11, JND trans.). That she firmly believed this was shown by her readiness to risk her life to identify herself with the people who had the LORD as their God.

Conclusion

“As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also” (v.26). The spirit is the life force of the body. Through the body the spirit expresses itself. So faith is expressed through works that bring honour to God. As a result of this study, let us resolve to show ourselves faithful to God as those who:

1. Worship Him as Father: “But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth” (John 4:23,24).
2. Walk in His will: “Be ye therefore followers of God, as dear children; and walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweetsmelling savour” (Ephesians 5:1,2).

3. Work according to his purpose: “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 15:58).
4. Witness to His Person: The Lord said to His disciples, “But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost has come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth” (Acts 1:8).
5. War against evil for Him: “Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might. Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil...that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand” (Ephesians 6:10-13). May we do so for His Name’s sake!

*Faith
without
works
is dead*

A Look at Nehemiah for Today

Part 5 – A mind to work (4:1-23)

Ted Murray

“When the going gets tough, the tough get going” runs the saying. Be encouraged as you see how, through the help of God and the encouragement of Nehemiah, the people of God got going in their tough circumstances. We need to be like them.

Satan’s wiles

This fourth chapter of Nehemiah has important lessons to teach us about our daily Christian life, with its conflicts, its difficulties, and, most importantly, the testimony we bear to Christ’s Name. The chapter opens with another aspect of the enemy’s attacks. So far, Nehemiah and the returned exiles had encountered a grieved enemy (2:10) and a mocking and scornful enemy (2:19). Now we come across a very indignant and furious enemy. There is a progression in the intensity of the enemy’s attacks. Satan does not change. God, in His mercy, has given us numerous examples in Scripture of Satan’s workings and methods of attack. We need to take note of these lessons from Scripture to see how Satan organises the forces at his disposal to attack the believer today. So Paul warns us that we need to put on the whole armour of God to stand against the wiles of the devil (Ephesians 6:11). Paul warns the Galatian believers of the dangerous effects of leaven, that false teaching that Satan was seeking to promote among them. But Paul also encourages us that “the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds” (2 Corinthians 10:4). We can be thankful that not only are the warnings given us in Scripture, but we are also reminded of the resources available for our protection and comfort.

The enemy gets busy

The opposition is now united as they ready themselves to oppose the work of God. Having expressed their concerns to Nehemiah and the Jewish leaders about the plans for the rebuilding of the walls, Sanballat and his associates now turn to ridicule. Their hope was that the piles of rubbish and burnt stones would have been enough to dishearten the people. But this, like their earlier attack, was of no effect. Commenting on the history of the church, H.A.Ironside writes, “As the result of centuries of darkness, superstition, and human traditions, practically every precious truth of Scripture was overwhelmed by the accumulation of ecclesiastical rubbish gradually accumulated”. How we can thank God for the reformers of the 16th and of the 19th centuries!

Sanballat and company now decide on a frontal attack on their enemies. This must have been a fearful experience for Nehemiah and his people. Here was a fully armed force of men with all the weapons of siege against a partially repaired citadel defend-

ed by people who were not all from Jerusalem (see ch.3). These people would have had concerns about their families, their homes, their livestock and their land. Today we are confronted by a Christian testimony that in many places is in ruins. Believers have concerns about domestic, family and business problems that, in many cases, seem to take priority over the call to serve the Lord. It is due to our neglect, unfaithfulness and failure that breaches and breakdown occur. The reminder from Proverbs 3:5,6 to trust in the Lord, acknowledge Him and He will take care of the outcome is something for all of us to remember and act upon. Paul, writing to the Colossians, insists on the pre-eminence of the Lord in our every day dealings (1:18).

Nehemiah must have realised that he was outnumbered and outflanked. From a human point of view, the job should be stopped and the workers sent home. There are times when we, too, looking around us at our assemblies, locally and nationally, become downcast by the failures, the lack of zeal, the lack of numbers. There is the temptation to give up the task and go home to our families, to business or to take up some leisure activity to fill our week. God forbid that these wayward thoughts become a reality!

Telling God about it

Nehemiah would have been able to cast his mind back to that day in the palace, to the night when he first surveyed the walls, and to the day when he announced his intention to the leaders of Jerusalem to rebuild. Similarly, it is good for us, at times, to look back over our lives and see the way the Lord has led us. So we can be reminded of past blessings which then encourage us for the future. Nehemiah turns to the One who, alone, had sustained, protected and encouraged him. He lays it all before Him with the words, “Hear, O our God...” (v.4). He then identifies himself with the builders. He simply puts the facts before the Lord and gets on with the work! What an example for us today! If, instead of wringing our hands and talking about the problems that face us, we were to follow Nehemiah’s example, we too would see blessing from God. If, like Nehemiah, we realised that the opposition is an affront to our God and we were in the good of this fact, we too would be more than conquerors through Him who loves us and died for us (Romans 8:37).

Praying and watching

The building progresses (v.6) and provides two important lessons for us. Firstly, there was a unity of purpose amongst the people. They had a mind to work. Secondly, the opposition intensified. They became very angry and conspired to attack and cause confusion among the builders. We now come to an important moment in the rebuilding project. The builders’ initial enthusiasm was starting to wane, their impatience was growing, and they were only at the halfway stage. Although they had had a mind to build (v.6), now they are a little downcast: “There is much rubbish; so that we are not able to build the wall” (v.10). At this point, the opposition musters its troops. But we

are told of the response of Nehemiah and the people: “We made our prayer unto our God, and set a watch against them...” (v.9).

Just to pray about the matter was, and is, not enough. There was a need to be watchful at all times, so they set a watch night and day. Paul reminds us that this attitude of praying and watching is necessary still today (Ephesians 6:18). There is a great need today to be diligent, to be aware of what is happening around us, and to be vigilant, so that the enemy is not able to infiltrate the church. Paul’s epistle to the Galatians bears eloquent testimony to havoc carried out by the enemy within.

As we proceed down the chapter, there is another lesson. Jews and Samaritans were living side by side. Warning them ten times of the impending assault, and that there would be no escape for anyone, the Samaritans hoped that this would discourage the builders. What an effect this had when it was brought to the ears of Nehemiah! The people had laboured, prayed and watched. Now they have to prepare for conflict. They were to defend the wall (v.13), their brethren, their families and their houses (v.14).

Getting priorities right

The order of these priorities is significant. The importance of the testimony of Jerusalem itself seems to be paramount, followed by the welfare of the brethren, then the family and, finally, the houses. Today, we seem to have reversed this order. Our homes seem to take priority, followed by family commitments, then the care of the brethren, and finally our Christian testimony. Time after time, we hear that family needs, house redecoration or repairs have top priority in our daily lives and the testimony has to take its place on the back seat. We ought to give more heed to our personal and corporate efforts regarding our Christian testimony.

Nehemiah organised the people to be able to continue the building work and put them in a strong defensive position, arming them so that they were ready should conflict arise. But most importantly, he encourages the people with the words, “Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, great and awesome, and fight for your brethren, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your houses” (v.14).

Dealing with fear

It has been said that “Nothing is so much feared as fear”. People of God throughout the ages have had to deal with this problem of fear. It is one of Satan’s favourite methods to hinder the testimony of God and is used with great effect on most of us. Isaiah 12:2 gives us the recipe for overcoming fear: “Behold, God is my salvation, I will trust and not be afraid”. Nehemiah’s battle cry was “Remember the Lord” (v.14). So Paul reminded Timothy, “Remember Jesus Christ” (2 Timothy 2:8), and counselled the Colossians that the Lord must have the pre-eminence in all things (Colossians 1:18). We need to heed these exhortations today. As we remember the Lord, we are reminded of His Person, His work, His worth, and also the place which He fills at the Father’s right hand. With such a Saviour, Lord and Friend, why should we fear the enemy who

has already been defeated at the cross of Calvary? Jacob was a man full of fear, who had had experience of God's goodness, who prayed but did not fully trust, and who finished up lame (see Genesis 32)! Let's take heed of the warning!

The trowel and the sword

Our chapter now tells of the victory of this particular skirmish. Nehemiah does not say to the people, "Well, that's over, just carry on as before". He decides on a strategy that would help them to go on unhindered with the rebuilding of the wall. The company is divided into two parts, each part with a particular task. One company is fully armed for the defence of the city, the other carries on the building but still carrying a sword as well as a trowel (vv.16-18). These tools remind us of the word of God. The trowel aspect is used for the edification of the saints; the sword is used "to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3).

But Nehemiah still has a further concern. The workers were scattered over the whole wall, and if the enemy attacked at a point where there were fewer people, there was the possibility of a breakthrough. Nehemiah uses a trumpet, an instrument with a strident sound. The trumpet had been used to assemble the camp of the Israelites in the wilderness, prior to moving on (see Numbers 10). It was also used to sound the alarm in case of attack. It was blown only by the priests, those men dedicated to the service of God. In Nehemiah's day, the trumpeter was one "was beside me" (v.18).

So the servant who sounds the message of the Lord today has to know the Lord's mind. He has to stand by Him; he has to experience daily communion with the Lord in order to deliver His message to His people. How we need servants today who are able to minister the word of God in this way! But there is equally a responsibility placed upon all of us to make sure that, by our presence at Bible readings, Fellowship Meetings etc., we are in places where the word of God can be ministered under the direction of the Holy Spirit so that the oracles of God can be made known to His people.

In the closing verses of this chapter, we sense the devotion of the people. They laboured day and night in a two shift system (v.21). Moreover, they all stayed near the job (v.22). There were to be no deserters, no going home to see to things there. The key word was 'zealousness', and it was not confined to the labourers only. The rulers, the chiefs of families, the householders and their servants, together with Nehemiah, his brethren and his servants, all had this zeal. There is a deep need for a similar zeal to be evident in the assemblies today so that the breakdown in the testimony might be repaired.

Summary

This chapter shows us how things can be done. In the Lord, we have the resources. But it is up to us to refuse to compromise with the spirit of our age. What a challenge this chapter brings before us! We need to question our zeal, our motives before the Lord, praying that we are not found wanting.

Power for Christian Living

Part 3 – The power of love

Jonathan Hughes

“For God so loved the world that He gave...” are the familiar words of John 3:16. They uniquely demonstrate the power of love. But that same love has been shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5) so that we might know and show its power. This article is based on a talk given on London’s Premier Radio.



Introduction

“Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails...And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (1 Corinthians 13:4-8, 13).

The two previous articles in this series have looked at faith and hope. Before considering the power of love, it is important to understand why it rests supreme amongst these three virtues. Unlike faith and hope, love is an integral part of the character of God (1 John 4:8). As we display love in our lives, we are reflecting the very nature of God. Moreover, the love we say we have for God is measured by the love we show our fellow men.

Faith and hope lead us on to a better appreciation of God. Love is an end in itself, and most surely comes from a better understanding of God. Faith and hope are essentially for my benefit,

whereas love takes us out of ourselves, for others are always the beneficiaries of our love. So we can see why love reigns supreme amongst these three great Christian qualities.

While we readily recognise the supremacy of love, we have to confess that so often we have difficulty with the practical display of love. Increasing levels of family breakdown and abuse, arguments amongst different groups of Christians, increasing violence in society and internationally – these all bear solemn testimony to the fact that we know very little of true biblical love. Many, having been let down, feel that love is an impossible ideal, a road to hurt and pain. We shall look at the lives of four individuals in Scripture to see that love is possible, but only when it springs from a knowledge of the ultimate source of love, God Himself.



Love bears all things

In the New International Version, the very first mention of love comes in Genesis 20:13: “[Abraham] said to [Sarah], ‘This is how you can show your love to me. Everywhere we go, say of me, ‘He is my brother’””. So much is made about the

first rush of romantic love. So many love songs have been written about when boy meets girl. One might almost think that this first blossoming of love would prove the strongest. Yet it is not so. Of all the words that can be used to describe Sarah, perhaps 'steadfast' is the best. In some ways, Abraham was a great dreamer, an idealist. So he shares his God-given dream of a promised land with Sarah. In almost missionary fervour, she consents to leaving everything behind, following him on a road with no clear end in view. And yet it is not in this way that Sarah demonstrates the depth of her love for Abraham. It is much later that the power of Sarah's love shines brightest. For the second time in her married life, Sarah is massively let down by her husband. As he dwells in Gerar, ruled by King Abimelech, Abraham tells Sarah to pretend that she is his sister, not his wife. What an abject denial of all she deserved! Abraham does nothing less than ask Sarah to put her neck on the block rather than his! He puts her into real danger, so that he can protect himself. She might easily have been raped and taken into Abimelech's harem, or worse. Staggeringly, Sarah agrees. She never lost sight of the man Abraham was to become. The father of a nation was not born that way; he became such through life's ups and downs. Through thick and thin, Sarah stands shoulder to shoulder with Abraham, knowing in her heart that he would rise again to become the man that God had called him to be. In agreeing to Abraham's request, Sarah was indicating that his vision was more important than her life.

You say that you love Jesus as your Saviour and readily sing of your love for Him. So prove it now! Love is not a word or a feeling. It is God at work through us! So today, this week, for the rest of your life, let this sacrificial love be a feature of your relationship within the family and the Christian fellowship. What a tremendous thing it would be if I was prepared continuously to bear another's failure to my own cost! If I claim to love God, then I should be ready to pay the price of another's failure to allow them the time to grow up to be the person that God wants them to be.

Sarah has rarely received the acclaim she deserves. She bore with personal famine, a wandering husband, a spouse who



denied her the respect she deserved. This all sounds so 21st century. In her steadfast, unswerving loyalty to Abraham, she stands in judgment on so many today, who drift apart, making no effort to sustain a relationship. It is impossible to know just how many tears fell from Sarah's eyes as she tenaciously, almost single-handedly at times, maintained her marriage. It can not have been easy, and yet she did not give up, for love bears all things.



Love believes all things

Was Sarah's love misplaced? Not at all, for in Genesis 22 we see its fruit (please read the chapter, however familiar it may be). Abraham, the man of God, in his total trust in God and in believing faith, is now ready to obey God even to the extent of sacrificing his only son, Isaac. As Abraham took the knife to sacrifice his son, God intervened to stop him. What God did not demand from Abraham, He would Himself do, in sacrificing His Son, to be able righteously to forgive a sinful world! What an awful test Abraham had to endure! His love for his only son would not have been in doubt, and yet he was prepared to offer him back to God!

I remember the time when my youngest son fell from a jetty and cut his head open. As we waited for an ambulance, his eyes started to roll into the top of his head and, for a brief moment, I thought he was dying. The feeling was awful. I wasn't ready for that. Even when he was safe in hospital that night, I could not sleep, fearing the worst. And yet I can scarcely begin to understand what emo-

tions were raging in Abraham's breaking heart.

However, in amongst all those emotions, Abraham had the rock solid assurance that all would come right in the end. God had promised so much through Isaac. Abraham clearly had some sense of this, for he tells his servants to wait until he and his son came back to them. Abraham held on to what God had said and it was this that sustained him through the heat of trial. Love, then, enables us to hold on to what God has said, even through the severest trials.

Sadly, we live in an age of general half-heartedness. So many just give up at the first sign of spiritual hardship. We say we believe that God is in control, that He will work all things for the good of them that love Him, but we give up as soon as life becomes difficult. Real Christian love enables us to stand firm when everyone else around us falls away. Sometimes we are driven to our knees and, with tears, cry out for help. We are unable to see the way ahead, not even a light at the end of the tunnel. Yet we know that through it all, He is able to keep us.

We may not be able to understand His ways with us now, but that does not really matter. Love would tell us that His promise to be with us, to bring us safely home, should be enough. Jesus told His disciples, "If you love Me, keep My commandments" (John 14:15). Christianity is not a package of optional extras that we can pick and choose at will. It is a relationship with the Lord Jesus, based upon His word. To try to build a relationship, whilst ignoring a part of His word, or overemphasising another part, is to coun-

terfeit what is real. If Abraham had decided just to go and pray with Isaac, or to sacrifice something else, he would have failed utterly, and missed out on learning so much about his God. So we, too, when we disobey God's word, cheat only ourselves and miss out on God's best for our lives. Love gives us the spiritual energy to pursue His way without fainting, knowing that His will is best, for love believes all things.



Love hopes all things

Divine love is not blind, nor is it naïve. It does not believe something to be true when it is plainly not. Yet when love is disappointed by the actions of others, so it continues to hope for a better future. The natural human tendency, when someone fails us, is to protect ourselves and to reject the one who has let us down. Love would keep us from this, hoping for a brighter tomorrow.

We see this beautifully illustrated in the story of Hosea. Poor Hosea, how costly it was for him to obey his God! He is told to marry a wife, Gomer, whom God knew would be unfaithful to Hosea. They have children whose names accurately reflect the state of the nation of Israel. Gomer then turns to prostitution and is sold in the slave market. Now God comes to Hosea again and tells him to go and buy back his wife. How humiliating for a man in his position! And yet Hosea does all this. But his love for Gomer would not tolerate second best for her. He writes, "And I said to her, "You shall stay with me many days; you shall not play the prostitute, nor shall you have a

man; thus I will also be toward you"" (Hosea 3:3).

Tough love is nothing new! Hosea would not give up on Gomer, but neither would he accept less than the best for her – and her prostitution was certainly not the best. Of course, the life of Hosea was nothing less than an object lesson to Israel; we in the Church have been unfaithful, just like Israel. But love will not give up just because it is disappointed. So, later in the book of Hosea, we get an insight into the very heart of God, as He cries out, "O Ephraim, what shall I do to you?...How can I give you up, Ephraim?" (6:4; 11:8,9).

God had wanted nothing but the best for Israel, and yet He had been let down so often. His love for them would still hope for a return to Him in repentance. His judgment upon them is not final. Even today, Israel holds a special place in the heart of God and will, in a day to come, play a central role in the plans of God. Time and time again God could have cast Israel aside in judgment because of her disobedience. Love's hope for a better tomorrow kept Him from pursuing such a course.



So often we may be let down and hurt by the actions of others. The natural reaction is to become like a hedgehog.

We hide our vulnerability under a coat of prickly hardness. So often, we are ready

to believe the worst in another, to act as judge and jury before we even know the facts of a matter. Love would keep us from this path. It would keep us ever open and sensitive to the needs of others, always believing the best of another until proved otherwise, and then always looking for a brighter future.

Such behaviour is costly, and will lead inevitably to my being hurt. But then isn't that an opportunity for Him to heal the wounds? The Lord dealt with the woman taken in adultery in just this way. His words to her, "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more" (John 8:11) are so full of love. He would not condemn, for He Himself would soon pay the penalty, in blood, for her adultery. But He also tells her to sin no more! She could be so much better than what she had been. Beneath the sinful exterior, Jesus saw the beautiful woman she could become. So often we never take the time, or make the effort, to look beneath the surface of another's actions. It is so much easier just to condemn – but love hopes all things.



Love endures all things

God did not want His people to be in unwilling slavery for life, and so He made provision for their release after six years of service (see Exodus 21:2-6). It is not difficult to imagine the excitement felt by the servant as the time drew near for his release. However, that excitement may well have been tempered by anxiety, or grief, if the servant had been given a wife by his master, since the wife and any children would still belong to the master. So there was an

option that allowed the family to stay together. If the love the servant had for his wife was such that he could not leave her, then he could plainly state his love for his master, his wife and children. In such a case, in view of all the judges and quite publicly, the servant would have his ear drilled through. Such a mark would indicate that, for the rest of his life, the servant would remain a servant. There would be, there could be, no going back. Two years down the line, if the servant fell out with his wife, or if his wife died, he would still remain his master's servant. Now, of course, the Lord Jesus Himself best answers to this Hebrew servant. As a perfect Man, He obeyed His Father in everything. At the cross, He plainly said, "I love My master, My wife and My children (the Church); I will not go out free". Even now in heaven, He acts as a perfect Servant, such is His love for us!

There might have been days when the master mistreated his servant, or when the servant and his wife argued, that regrets for his decision would have surfaced. Still there was no going back! This is the sort of love we need in our lives today. Disappointments and adversity are a normal part of life, and persecution is an integral part of Christianity. The temptation to give up in the face of hardship can, at times, be overwhelming. And yet love would keep our hearts steadfastly fixed on Him. No service we do for Him can ever begin to repay Him for all that He has already done for us. Like the servant in Luke 17, we can admit only to being unprofitable servants, to doing only our duty.

We live in such an instant society – people live just for the moment. As Christians, we need to be seen to be radically different. When we love someone, we need to do so wholeheartedly and forever. Love is a unilateral act. God loved us, not because we were particularly loveable, or deserving, but because He is love (see 1 John 4). We, in turn, should love one another, not because of a response we may get, but because of a conscious act of will. Such love is so liberating because it expects nothing, but is ready to give everything. Even when love is not returned, it persists because love endures all things.



Conclusion

We have looked at four real people.

The love they displayed was a real love, a costly love, a hard love. In the love of a wife for her husband, a father for his son, a husband for his unfaithful wife, and a servant for his master and wife, we have covered many human relationships. In all cases, the love given was costly. An easier path would have beckoned, and yet love could not be denied. Hard choices, which did not rely on emotional satisfaction, had to be made. The challenge for us today is clear. Are we prepared to love our family, our fellow believers, and the world in general in such a way?

There are times when we must forgo what we believe to be our rights in order to sacrifice for the good of

others, like Sarah. There are times when we must crush our natural desires and look towards the goal, rather than at immediate circumstances, like Abraham. There are times when, like Hosea, we must continue to love someone when they have behaved in a way that has hurt us, and caused us real pain. And there are times when, like the Hebrew servant, we must deny ourselves so that we may express our love for one another.

Is such love possible? It is not only possible but, as we have seen in the lives of these Old Testament saints, it is expected of us! It is normal Christianity. Sometimes we fail to live up to these ideals. What a comfort it is to know then that, despite ourselves, God still loves us! His love for us will never diminish. It will ensure that we are kept until that day when God presents us to His Son a perfect bride, a glorious church, without spot or wrinkle, holy and without blemish (Ephesians 5:27)! Until that day, then let us love one another as He has loved us.

*A real love
a costly love
a hard love*

The Gospel in Job

Part 8 – Elihu and his speech

Yannick Ford

“A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a picture of silver” (Proverbs 25:11). After the pathetic speeches of Job’s so-called comforters, what a blessing it is to listen to the ‘fitly spoken’ words of Elihu. His words still have a message for us today.

Introduction (ch.32)

We now have Elihu brought before us (the meaning of his name has been variously translated as ‘my God is Jehovah’, ‘God Himself’ and ‘God (or whose God) is He’). The context of vv.1-5 shows that Elihu was present all the time with Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. It is possible that Elihu himself may have written part or all of the book of Job since he seems to be the narrator in vv.15,16: “They were amazed, they answered no more: they left off speaking. When I had waited, (for they spake not, but stood still, and answered no more)”.

One of the first things that comes across is that, in contrast with Job’s other friends, Elihu is spiritually intelligent: he very quickly summarises the whole issue, and then proceeds with worthwhile things to say. The comments of Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar had not been helpful, even though they did say some true things, yet not necessarily applied in the right manner. Firstly, we are told that Elihu was angered because, firstly, Job was justifying himself rather than God (v.2) and, secondly, Job’s friends were accusing Job without having grounds to do so (v.3). This neatly summarises the previous 28 chapters!

However, although Elihu was evidently bursting to speak (see vv.18-20), he had waited patiently because Job and his other friends were older than he. This is a very commendable attitude, and shows that in spiritual things, as in other areas of life, self-control is a valuable asset. So, in similar vein, Paul writes about the proper order that should characterise the church today: “And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets. For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints” (1 Corinthians 14:32,33).

Elihu says that one might expect the aged to have greater wisdom, but it is not always so (vv.6-9). Certainly in matters to do with God, age is of far less consequence than spiritual intelligence. Elihu alludes to this: “But there is a spirit in man: and the inspiration of the Almighty giveth them understanding” (v.8). It is the presence of the Holy Spirit that gives the ability to understand God and His ways. So Paul writes, “But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. But God hath

revealed them unto us by his Spirit...But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God...But we have the mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:9-16).

It is clear from the above passage that the ‘natural man’, i.e. an unconverted person who, consequently, does not have the Spirit of God, is not able to enter into an understanding of God’s ways. Nevertheless, the Holy Spirit can work on such a person to bring him to a realisation of his guilty state before God and his need of forgiveness. If he believes and receives this, then he will be converted, and the Holy Spirit will give him spiritual life: “...who first trusted in Christ. In whom [i.e. Christ] ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that Holy Spirit of promise” (Ephesians 1:12-13).

In many ways, Elihu illustrates how the Holy Spirit works with various individuals, as we shall see in the following sections. So, in vv.12,13, Elihu states that none of Job’s friends were able to convince Job; it would be God, not man, who would make Job yield. If someone is going to be convinced of their guilty state before God and their need of forgiveness, it must be through the work of God’s Spirit. He may use other people, literature, etc., but ultimately it is God’s word, in the power of the Holy Spirit, that will do the work. God’s Word is always true – it does not adapt itself to what we might like to hear, or to political correctness, for example. Similarly, Elihu states at the outset (vv.21,22) that he will not be flattering anyone, but rather speaking the truth, and explaining things as they really are.

The purpose of God’s ways (ch.33)

This is a particularly interesting chapter as it shows clearly the true purpose of the ways of God, and how He works to bring us to forgiveness and relationship with Himself. Elihu starts off in vv.1-7 by taking a humble position; he acknowledges that he himself is nothing, and that in himself he is no better than Job: “Behold, before God I am as thou; I also am formed out of the clay” (v.6, JND trans.). However, or perhaps as a consequence of this, his words are with authority, no doubt because they are spiritual. In matters of life and death, of God, of judgment and forgiveness, of heaven and hell, it is vital to be able to speak authoritatively i.e. to know what one is speaking about, and to be certain that this is the truth. The consequences of error are far too serious and important to do otherwise. The Lord Jesus spoke in this way: “And it came to pass, when Jesus had ended these sayings, the people were astonished at his doctrine: for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes” (Matthew 7:28,29).

Elihu continues with a succinct and accurate statement of Job’s position (vv.8-11). Basically, Job was claiming that he was pure and totally without fault, and yet God was unjustly afflicting him, and treating Job as an enemy. Elihu’s response to this can seem surprising initially: “Behold, in this thou art not just: I will answer thee, that God is greater than man. Why dost thou strive against him? for he giveth not account

of any of his matters” (vv.12,13). Rather than starting by disagreeing with Job’s comments, Elihu simply says in effect, “You are wrong to question God – it is not your place to do so, and God does not have to justify His actions to you!” God does, in fact, have excellent reasons for acting as He does, and they are for our benefit, as Elihu will show. So why does Elihu start off with this rather unpalatable statement? Perhaps the reason is that all of us need to recognise our position as creatures before God; to have the right attitude at the outset, before He can bless us. We are told that “God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble” (James 4:6; see also 1 Peter 5:5, and Proverbs 3:34, which is the source of these quotations). In very similar fashion, Paul replies to a question in Romans 9:19,20: “Thou wilt say then unto me, Why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will? Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus?” We cannot go to God simply on our own terms; we need to recognise His sovereignty.

However, immediately after this seemingly hard answer, Elihu continues with what is a wonderful presentation of the Gospel (vv.14-33). The passage can be summarised as follows. God speaks to men and women more than once, but we do not always listen or understand (v.14), often because pride is our biggest problem (v.17). If we are not listening to God, He may need to ‘speak louder’ by means of unpleasant circumstance (vv.19-22). God wants to bring us to our senses by this discipline, to teach us about the fundamental, all-important issues of life. No doubt, He would prefer not to have to afflict us if we would listen in the first place, but sometimes it is only difficult circumstances that will drive us to God and tear us away from the many distractions that surround us. A ‘messenger’ (v.23) is required to help us make sense of all these things. It would seem that such messengers are rare – “one among a thousand” – but God is in control of all things, and will send one to those who are in need.

We can praise God that He does, indeed, send such messengers, but if we are in a living relationship with Him, we also should desire to be such messengers for Him! The messenger comes with good news: you will not be going to the grave and to the destroyers (v.22), because a ransom has been found for you (v.24)! That message of Elihu is still the central message of the Gospel of God’s grace: a ransom has been found! The true ransom, the One that answers to the picture given here by Elihu, is the Lord Jesus Himself. Peter writes of

*A
ransom
has
been
found
for
you*

the Lord Jesus, “[He]... bore our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed” (1 Peter 2:24). If we accept this, we will never have to suffer the consequences of our sins, because the Lord Jesus was our ransom, and justice has already been exacted.

The wonderful truth of a ransom being found is further pictured by Elihu: “He will sing before men, and say, I have sinned, and perverted what was right, and it hath not been requited to me; he hath delivered my soul from going into the pit” (vv.27,28, JND trans.). Vv. 29,30 show us that this is what God desires for us, and wishes to make us understand. It is a wonderful thing when we have the assurance that our sins *are* forgiven, and that all judgment is passed! We can then exclaim:

In Him I dare be joyful, a hero in the war,
The judgment of the sinner affrighteth me no more.
There is no condemnation, there is no hell for me,
The torment and the fire my eyes shall never see;
For me there is no sentence, for me death has no stings,
Because the Lord who saved me shall shield me with His wings.

(Paul Gerhardt, translated by Mrs E.F.Bevan)

Elihu justifies God and His ways (ch.34)



Having explained the underlying purpose of God’s ways, which is to bless, Elihu now justifies God and rebukes Job for having suggested that God was acting unfairly and unjustly towards him: “For Job hath said, I am righteous: and God hath taken away my judgment” (v.5). And as a corollary to this, Job was saying that there was no point in being righteous before God, since evil circumstances would occur anyway (v.9).

Elihu indignantly refutes this: “Therefore hearken unto me, ye men of understanding: far be it from God, that he should do wickedness; and from the almighty, that he should commit iniquity” (v.10). It is totally foreign to God’s character to do evil, Elihu states, and besides, who are we to take God to task for what He does?! He is the owner of the world, and is answerable to no-one (vv.12,13). If He wanted to, Elihu continues, He could simply think of Himself and dispose of us all: “If he only thought of himself, and gathered unto him his spirit and his breath, all flesh would expire together, and man would return to the dust” (vv.14,15, JND trans.). However, mercifully this is not the case; God does think of us, and is completely impartial – He is “most

just” (v.17). As such, He is fully aware of all our doings, even if others are not (v.21); we cannot hide from Him (v.22). What a solemn thought!

Elihu opposes Job’s self-righteousness (ch.35)

In criticising God and His ways, Job was implicitly claiming that he was more righteous than God (v.2)! In his bitterness, Job had asked what was the point of trying to be righteous – he might just as well have been wicked (v.3).

Yes, Elihu replies, in one sense what you do does not appear to affect God, although it may affect other people (vv.5-8). (This is not true, of course, since God is concerned with all our actions. The Lord Jesus equates actions done unto others as being done to Himself – see Matthew 25:31-46; Acts 9:4). But although God is concerned about people and their actions, none seek after Him (v.10). God teaches us more than the beasts of the earth – unlike them, we have the opportunity to be in relationship with Himself (v.11).

Elihu further justifies God (36:1-21)

Elihu continues his speech to speak about the ways of God. He tells Job that although God is almighty, He does not despise us (v.5). He disciplines us so that we might recognise our iniquity, and so be forgiven and restored (vv.10-12). However, the “hypocrites in heart” refuse to acknowledge this and, consequently, they heap up anger towards themselves (v.13). Paul writes in similar vein: “Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance? But after thy hardness and impenitent heart treasurest up unto thyself wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God” (Romans 2:4,5). For people such as this, it is not wise to “desire the night” and “be cut off”; they need to get right with God first (v.20)!

The power of God (36:22- 37:24)

Elihu now speaks of the power of God in creating and sustaining the world. His basic message appears to be that God is a wise and powerful Creator and Sovereign, who controls the whole workings of nature perfectly. As such, He should be respected, and also trusted – the One who so wonderfully controls the natural world will surely be in control of Job’s situation. Elihu warns Job, “Remember that thou magnify his work, which men behold. Every man may see it; man may behold it afar off. Behold, God is great, and we know him not, neither can the number of his years be searched out” (36:24-26).

Elihu’s message contains some fundamental issues for us, too:

1. We should give God the glory for what He has done, both in creation and in redemption.
2. His works of creation can clearly be seen by all.
3. Although we cannot derive complete knowledge of God from His creation alone, His greatness is clearly evident.

The
heavens
declare
the
glory
of God

Today, popular opinion is that science and evolution have replaced the need for God in explaining why we are here in this world. This is not the place to enter the creation/evolution debate. Suffice it to say that intelligent design is clearly stamped on all aspects of the natural world and universe. The Bible does not offer proof that God is Creator – this is deemed to be self-evident and, therefore, *an acknowledgement of this is a responsibility*. This puts the whole subject on a more solemn footing than a mere academic argument between creationists and evolutionists, however interesting and necessary this is.

The psalmist, David, tells us, “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the expanse sheweth the work of his hands. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge. There is no speech and there are no words, yet their voice is heard. Their line is gone out through all the earth, and their language to the extremity of the world”

(Psalm 19:1-4). Here, the heavens (i.e. stars, planets, etc.) are said to declare the glory of God. This is a clear message – there are no words as such, yet throughout all the earth, this message of God’s creatorial greatness can be clearly seen. The apostle Paul takes up a similar theme: “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness; because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse: because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools” (Romans 1:18-22).

Once again, we are told that the evidence of God’s creation is clearly seen, so that if we reject it, we are *without excuse* in God’s sight. We should glorify God and be thankful, but if we willingly reject Him, our understanding is affected, and we become as fools, believing foolish things.

Elihu clearly did believe in a Creator God, and speaks eloquently about God’s power in various aspects of the natural world. He finally sums up: “Touching the Almighty, we cannot find him out: he is excellent in power, and in judgment, and in plenty of justice: he will not afflict. Men do therefore fear him: he respecteth not any that are wise of heart” (37:23,24). Thus we are brought back to one of the first steps in seeking God: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:10).

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Redeemed

“Redeemed...with the precious blood of Christ” (1 Peter 1:18,19)

I wear no rude offender’s chain,
I stand redeemed, unfettered, free.
My soul can ne’er be bound again —
A royal price was paid for me!

He broke the cruel bonds I wore,
In death He bought my liberty
And made me His for evermore
In that great price He paid for me.

He holds me by love’s lasting bands,
His own, His rightful property.
My name’s engraved on both His hands,
And the awful price He paid for me.

Oh, to behave with royal grace,
As one of noblest family:
Aught else were surely out of place
Since such a price was paid for me!

The lowly ways the proud despise
Are high with heavenly dignity,
And every loss for Him He’ll prize
Who paid that precious price for me.

I.Y.Ewan

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*“Do you not know that...you are not your own?
For you were bought at a price” (1 Corinthians 6:19,20)*