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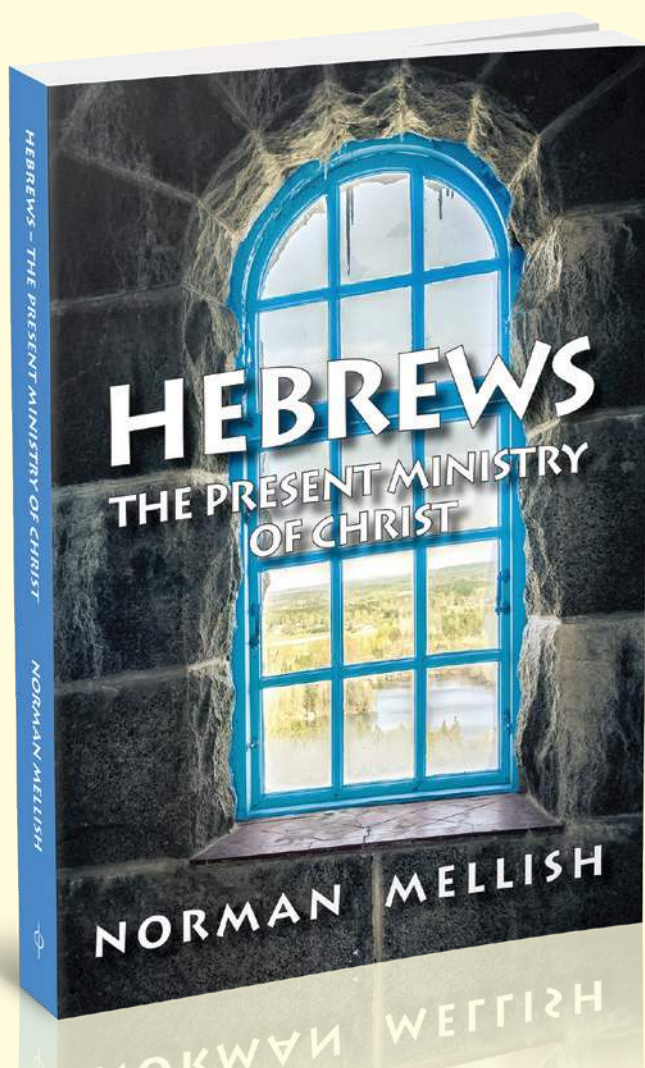
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'And Hiram king of Tyre sent messengers to David, and cedar trees, and carpenters, and masons', 2 Sam. 5. 11.

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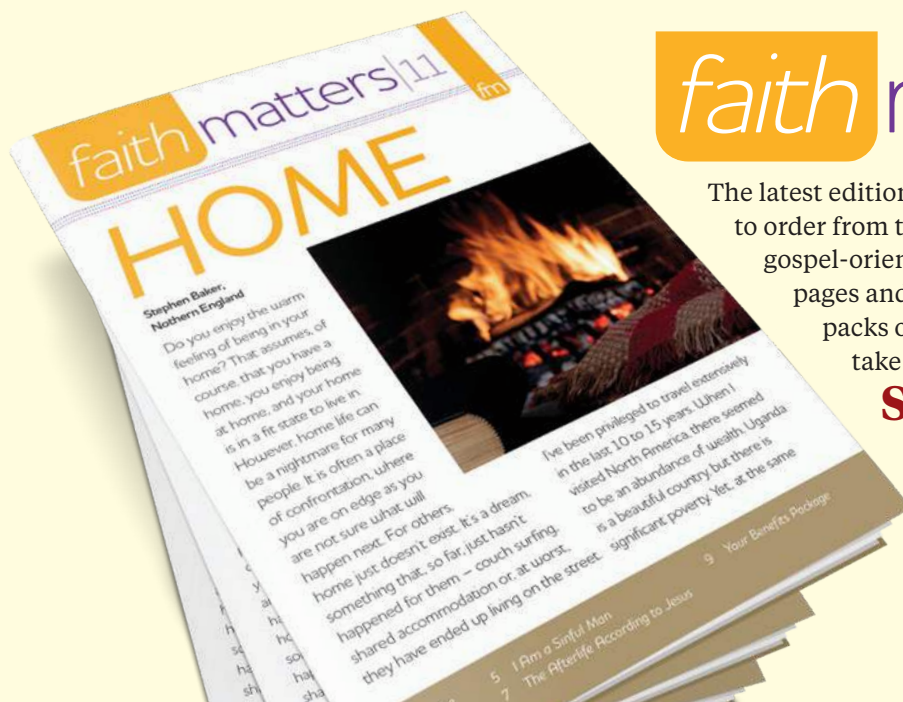
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‘As you have done, it will be done to you; your deeds will return upon your own head’ Obadiah 15b NIV

One of the most neglected books in the Old Testament is the prophecy of Obadiah, yet it has much to teach us today about the way in which God acts in the world around us. The name of the prophet is the only thing that we know about him other than his faithfulness to his commission, cp. 1 Cor. 4. 1, 2.

Whilst the book is the shortest in the Old Testament, it is not the easiest to interpret. But one thing that marks it out is the way in which the writer provides us with a detailed analysis of the sins of Edom. The prophet stirs up the surrounding nations to declare war against Edom because of their mistreatment of God’s people in the southern kingdom of Judah. Edom, a descendant of Esau, had historically been hostile towards the descendants of Jacob, Num. 20. 14, 21.

They not only harassed the people of God, but actively assisted Judah’s enemies in the siege of Jerusalem, Obad. 11-14; Ps. 137. 7. Notice the list of charges against Edom. They were

indifferent to Judah’s sufferings, v. 11, they rejoiced and boasted about Judah’s downfall, v. 12, they plundered Judah’s possessions, v. 13, and they blocked Judah’s escape route and handed over captives to their enemies, v. 14. Even though at the time the situation for Judah seemed bleak, almost irredeemable, the promises of God would not be thwarted and eventually the nation would be delivered out of Babylonian captivity. So, what Edom had done to Judah would be done to them, v. 15; Lam. 4. 21, 22.

This principle of retributive justice is evident throughout scripture. For example, the deception of Isaac by Jacob in stealing Esau’s blessing ultimately rebounds on Jacob. Not only does he never see his mother again, but he meets his uncle, Laban, who is even more devious than himself, and suffers the consequences, Gen. 29. 21-30. Later, after having to marry Leah, she would produce sons who deceived him about Joseph’s fate, 37. 31-35; cp. 27. 9, 16. God is never mocked, Gal. 6. 7!

Our Lord laid down the same principle when He told His disciples that they were not to judge other believers, but if they did, they would be judged in exactly the same way, Matt. 7. 1, 2. Similarly, He went on to emphasize the golden rule that doing unto others what we would have them do unto us fulfilled the teaching of the Law and the Prophets, 7. 12; Lev. 19. 18; Matt. 22. 39, 40. Paul affirms this principle in Romans chapter 2 verses 1 to 11.

Sometimes, as believers, we mistreat others or are mistreated ourselves. Obadiah not only spoke to his generation but provides us with a mirror for our own times. Evil practices only flourish if we exploit situations for our own advantage. This was Edom’s downfall and brought condemnation. Before we act, therefore, in future, let us think of the possible consequences of our actions, bearing in mind ‘As you have done, it will be done to you’.

BRIAN CLATWORTHY

Ministry Articles Editor

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By STEPHEN BAKER

The Apostle Paul 1

By **JOHN TINKLER** Red Row, Northumberland, England.

Perhaps the greatest event in the record of the early church, following that of the day of Pentecost, was the conversion of Saul of Tarsus; one who persecuted the people of 'this way' – those who were later called 'Christians', Acts 9. 2; 11. 26. He was to become God's messenger to the Gentiles, 22. 21.

The writer of the Acts of the Apostles can be identified as Luke, a medical doctor, Col. 4. 14, who penned the Gospel that bears his name. The book follows on from that Gospel and covers some thirty to thirty-five years. It is the only inspired record of the development of the early church and describes the progress of the gospel as a result of the labours of the Lord's servants.

The book of Acts opens by describing the ascension of our Lord Jesus and recording His outline of the geographical progress of the gospel. In His own words, 'Ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth', 1. 8. While Peter initially declared the message in Jerusalem, and Philip in Samaria, someone was needed to spread the message further, and so the Lord had His eye on a man whom He described as a 'chosen vessel', 9. 15. God's ways are past finding out! The man in question is first introduced to us as a persecutor of Christians but, as some would say, he had a 'Damascus road experience' when he met the risen Christ, whom he thought was dead. That encounter changed the course of his life thereafter. Here we must acknowledge the sovereignty of God.

Although the narrative of the Acts of the Apostles apparently ends abruptly, it does so with Paul still 'preaching the kingdom of God', 28. 31. So, the work which commenced at Pentecost was continuing, and it continues today, and will continue to do so until the Lord returns. God is still taking 'out of them [the Gentiles] a people for his name', 15. 14.

Although much has already been written about Paul, I would like to take a fresh look at him, and, in doing so, enable the reader to navigate through the vast

amount of material about him in the Acts and in the thirteen Epistles which we are sure that he wrote. May our meditation prove challenging as we seek to serve the Lord in the twenty-first century.

His past

Scripture is silent when it comes to the year of his birth and of his death. He is first mentioned under his former name, Saul, 7. 58. He was present at the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, and as Tertullian said, 'the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church'. Might it be that Saul was named after the first king of Israel? Both men came from the same tribe.

Paul was a citizen of Tarsus, 'no mean city', but was accorded heavenly citizenship, 21. 39; Phil. 3. 20. His father was a Jew who had been granted Roman citizenship, but Paul became 'a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee', Acts 22. 27, 28; 23. 6. Moreover, he was a devoted Pharisee, 26. 5. He would therefore have had a strict religious upbringing and been zealous for the law, which led him to persecute the church, something which later he realized was misplaced. As a Pharisee, he was connected with the ceremonies and ordinances of the Mosaic law. He would have had a detailed knowledge of the law of Moses, having memorized scripture, and been taught Jewish history.

He was well-educated at the feet of Gamaliel, who became his mentor, 22. 3, but was a tentmaker by trade, 18. 3. There seemed to be a great potential in him to become a leader of the Jewish faith. So much more could be written about the pedigree of this man, but he was to count it all but loss, Phil. 3. 8.

He was a blasphemer, 1 Tim. 1. 13, but a man who changed sides when he met the risen Christ!

Paul and persecution

Saul is mentioned first at the stoning of Stephen, Acts 7. 54-60, and in the next chapter we learn that he consented to Stephen's death, 8. 1. Although we are told that he made 'havock of the church', 8. 3, and if the Lord had not stepped into his life, he intended that the Christians be removed completely. He was a fanatic. Did Stephen pray for him? No doubt he was included in Stephen's prayer, 'Lord, lay not this sin to their charge', 7. 60. Stephen's martyrdom spoke to Saul, 22. 20. On his way to Damascus with letters authorizing him to persecute the believers there, the Lord intervened in his life, and from that day he was under His authority.

How many Christians have suffered for the gospel's sake over the years, and yet the perpetrators of that suffering have been gloriously saved! We recall that in comparatively recent times (1956), five missionaries laid down their lives in attempting to reach the Auca Indians with the gospel, and today there are believers in that very tribe! To God be the glory, Gal. 1. 23, 24! But the Lord did say to Ananias, 'I will show him [Saul] how great things he must suffer for my name's sake', Acts 9. 16.

It was not long after his conversion that Paul himself was persecuted. He experienced opposition from without, 9. 23, and opposition [mistrust] from within, v. 26. Paul gives us his own summary of his sufferings in 2 Corinthians chapter 11 verses 23 to 33.

A man of prayer

The first thing that Ananias was told by the Lord was that Paul was praying, Acts 9. 11. Before his conversion, his prayers would be formal and ritualistic, but now he was laying hold of God. He was beginning to manifest divine life – 'behold, he prayeth'.

Paul was a man of constant thanksgiving and prayer. How he found time to pray in view of his busy life is quite 'mind boggling'! See, for example, 'without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers', Rom. 1. 9.¹ What an intercessor! He prayed for different persons, places and problems. Today, we too can pray for family, friends, the fellowship, fellow-labourers, the frail, the fallen, and the field of the world,

Matt. 13. 38. Little prayer means little power. Much prayer means much power. No prayer means no power.

A man prepared

Paul tells us that he went to Arabia for the space of three years, Gal. 1. 15-18, and there is general agreement that this time could be inserted between Acts chapter 9 verses 21 and 22. In this he followed the steps of Moses, Elijah, and the Lord Jesus Christ. We must also remember that while Nehemiah tells us about his deep concern for Jerusalem, Neh. 1. 1-11, he did not start the rebuilding immediately. A lot of preparation had to be made, Neh. 2. 4-8, 12-18. God's men are prepared men.

Paul the preacher

Luke tells us that having been converted, Paul 'straightway . . . preached Christ in the synagogues' at Damascus, Acts 9. 20, and so began a life declaring the truth of God and bearing the Lord's

name 'before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel', v. 15. His first recorded sermon is in Acts chapter 13. This is the first of three preserved in the Acts. He could say, 'woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel', 1 Cor. 9. 16. He was 'appointed a preacher' of the gospel, 2 Tim. 1. 11. His messages were simple, scriptural, methodical and personal, and he took every opportunity to preach with the view of seeing souls saved, assemblies established, and saints grounded in the truth. Have we ever considered the number of miles he undertook to make the Lord known? It has been estimated he travelled 3,000 miles by land and 5,500 miles by sea. Thus, in his travels, trials and triumphs, he preached the word of God.

A man of the pen

Thirteen of the New Testament books were written by Paul. Galatians chapter 6 verse 11 indicates that one was written by his own hand. We have prison Epistles as well as personal Epistles to encourage

by his own experiences, example and endurance, and also pastoral Epistles, which can be summed up by the words, 'the care of all the churches', 2 Cor. 11. 28.

We cannot help but wonder how he had time to write with the busy schedule he had, but the thrust of his writings was to correct error, to encourage, to exhort and to edify. Such is their message to individuals and assemblies in the first century, and they are just as relevant today. They are timeless in their character and part of the canon of divine truth.

He did not always find it easy to write. We should note that there were times when:

- he wrote with tears, 2 Cor. 2. 4;
- he worked with tears, Acts. 20. 19;
- he warned with tears, Acts 20. 31;
- he walked with tears, Phil. 3. 18.

A love for people

Wherever he went, Paul met with many people. In Romans chapter 16, he lists many believers, and others are mentioned in 2 Timothy chapter 4 and Colossians chapter 4. No matter who they were, he never over-rated or underestimated them. He commences his Epistle to the Romans by saying, 'First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all', Rom. 1. 8. In the same Epistle, how delightful to notice how he links Erastus, the highest official in the city, with Quartus, known simply as 'a brother', possibly a slave, 16. 23. Seventy names are mentioned in his Epistles.

A man of palace experiences

Ananias was told by the Lord that Saul would 'bear my name before . . . kings', Acts 9. 15. Acts chapter 26 describes his experience before King Agrippa. Although Paul stood as a prisoner before this pitiful king, he rose to the occasion and courteously, but plainly, stated the facts. All are commendable features of this man of God.



Endnote

1. Other passages worthy of note are: Eph. 1. 16; Phil. 1. 4; Col. 1. 3; 1 Thess. 1. 2. Did Paul see in his mind the faces of those for whom he was praying?

HEAVENLY CONVERSATIONS 1

By **ERNEST ABBOTT** Singapore

God is triune; Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and all the actions of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are the actions of God. While one person of the Godhead may seem more prominent in any specific action, each of these actions involves the whole Godhead.

Within the Godhead there is communication between divine persons, and it is the purpose of this brief paper to survey the snippets of such heavenly conversations which have been recorded in scripture and into which we are privileged to have insight.

Us and our¹

There are a number of occasions when God is speaking and uses the plural pronoun 'us' or 'our'. The normal sense of the use of such plural pronouns is that there is more than one person involved in the conversation, yet, at the same time, we know that God is one, Deut. 6. 4. We conclude from this, and the context, that what is recorded is a conversation between the persons of the Godhead.

The very first conversation is found in Genesis chapter 1 verse 26, 'Let **us** make man in our image, after **our** likeness'. This is a conversation of intentionality involving the Godhead's decision to create man.

The second occasion is seen in Adam and Eve's first encounter with the Lord God following the fall, where Adam's sin was laid bare and the whole of creation was cursed; the Godhead's conversation conveys a degree of urgency about it, 'The Lord God said, Behold, the man is become as 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', 3. 22. The conversation seems to end abruptly, as if the consequences are too dreadful to contemplate. The biblical narrative continues, 'Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the

garden of Eden, . . . so he drove out the man', vv. 23, 24. Notice how the inspired narrative moves seamlessly from a conversation between the Godhead to the actions of the Lord God, showing the God who acts in unison and unity.

The third occasion in our consideration is at the point in human history when man was of one language and anti-God in purpose. This is evident in their conversations, 'Let us make brick', 11. 3. 'Go to, let us build us a city . . . let us make us a name', v. 4. Jehovah's response is clear from the Godhead's conversation, 'Go to, let **us** go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech', v. 7.

The fourth occasion is when we are privileged to have a glimpse of the heavenly throne room and hear Jehovah's conversation, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for **us**?' Isa. 6. 8. Isaiah, having heard, or overheard, the question posed in the conversation, presented himself to go for Jehovah, and thus took up the role and mantle of prophet.

These four occasions, where we hear conversations of the Godhead, take place at significant and pivotal points in man's or Israel's history; the creation of man, the fall of man,

separation of man by language and the call of Isaiah to prophethood.

The messianic psalms

A number of the psalms clearly have a messianic interpretation. It is not that the whole psalm can always be applied to the Lord Jesus, but parts can be. There are quotations from several psalms in the New Testament that are applied directly to Him, the incarnate Word, John 1. 14. It is these psalms that we shall consider next.

The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews, showing the superiority of the Son over any created beings (the angels), cites Psalm 2 verse 7, 'Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee', Heb. 1. 5. This is a conversation between the Father and the Son. It is not that the Son suddenly became the Son. He ever was the Son. The language of the psalm is couched in human terms, as its original use by the author was temporal, not eternal. It was human and not divine. It was a king to a subject, not the eternal Father to the eternal Son. Clearly, the author of Hebrews, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, elevates what may have been considered as the mundane to the supernatural.

Hebrews chapter 10 verses 5 to 7 quotes parts of Psalm 40, namely verses 6 to 8, which is the confirmation that parts of this psalm are messianic. This conversation is between the Son and the Father. The conversation shows a number of things connected to the incarnation. First, it shows the necessity of the incarnation, in that the Levitical sacrificial system was not adequate to take away sin, 'Sacrifice and offering thou didst not desire . . . burnt offering and sin offering hast thou not required', Ps. 40. 6; Heb. 10. 5, 6. Second, it shows that in the incarnation the Son became the obedient Servant, 'Mine ears hast thou opened'.² Third, it shows the willingness of the Son to do the Father's will, 'I delight to do thy will, O my God', Ps. 40. 8. Fourth, it shows that the incarnation is the fulfilment of prophecy, 'in the volume of the book it is written of me', v. 7. On the road to Emmaus, with two disciples, Jesus 'expounded unto them in all

the scriptures the things concerning himself', Luke 24. 27.

Peter, preaching on the birthday of the church, quotes from Psalm 16 verses 8 to 11.³ Verses 8 and 9 of the psalm are a personal reflection of the Lord Jesus on His life and hope. Verse 10 is where we break into the heavenly conversation. The Son is communing with the Father in full confidence of His resurrection, 'For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption'. The Son has full trust in the Father that He will again be with Him, which leads us to consider Psalm 68.

The ascension of our Lord Jesus is mentioned around sixteen times in the New Testament. Paul, when writing to the church at Ephesus, quotes Psalm 68 verse 18,⁴ which makes clear that the one referred to as 'thou' is the Lord Jesus. This can be seen as the Father speaking to the Son about His victorious accomplishments, 'Thou hast ascended on high, thou hast led captivity captive'. As Peter reminded his audience, 'David is not ascended into the heavens', Acts 2. 34. He then quotes part of the most quoted psalm in the New Testament. The scene is where the Father is speaking to the Son, 'The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool', Ps. 110. 1. The suggestion of Peter is that

this conversation took place after the ascension. It is in this psalm that we are privy to the investiture by the Father of the Son into the Melchizedekian priesthood, v. 4. A full exposition of the significance of this is brought out by the writer to the Hebrews in chapters 5 to 7.

The Servant Songs

There are four passages in the book of Isaiah that are referred to as '**The Servant Songs**'.⁵ The Son in the incarnation, 'made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men', Phil. 2. 7. The Servant Songs clearly point to the Lord Jesus in His earthly sojourn. Although parts of the songs are referenced in the New Testament, only one of the songs has a fragment of a divine conversation. In Isaiah chapter 49 verse 6, the Father says to the Son, 'I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth'. This is quoted by Paul in Acts chapter 13 verse 47 as a command from the Lord. That the Son is the light is echoed, or alluded to, by several writers of the New Testament.⁶

The Gospel records

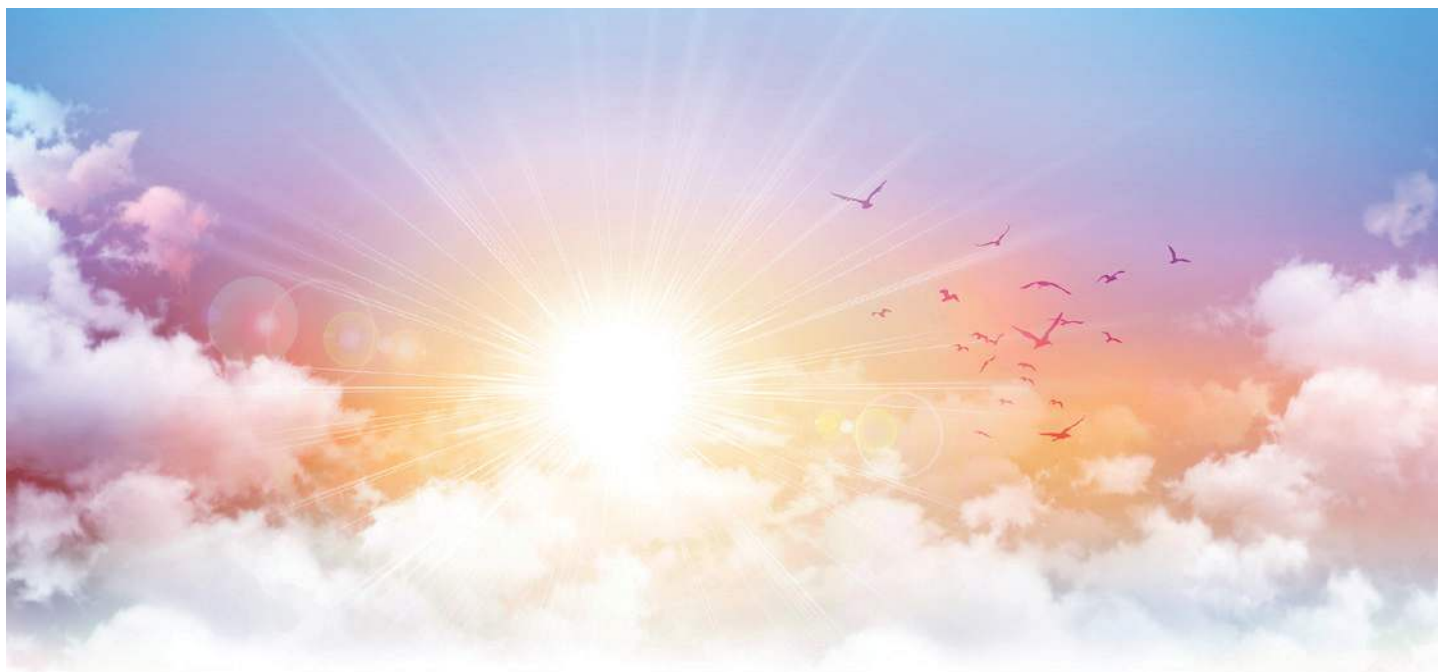
We begin at the baptism of Jesus, which is recorded in all four Gospel records. As Jesus comes out of the water, an event that prefigured His resurrection, the Father says, 'Thou

art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased', Mark 1. 11.

Although strictly not a heavenly conversation in the sense we have been using the term, there is a heavenly declaration that is worth mentioning. It takes place on the Mount of Transfiguration. It follows Peter's ill-informed suggestion to build three tabernacles, one for Moses, one for Elijah and one for Jesus Himself. The Father speaks from the cloud that had enveloped them all, 'This is my beloved Son: hear him', thus leaving the disciples in no doubt as to the uniqueness of Jesus as well as an affirmation from the Father to the Son of His beloved eternal relationship.⁷ This experience was clearly burnt into Peter's memory, of the occasion he writes, 'For he received from God the Father honour and glory, when there came such a voice to him from the excellent glory, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased', 2 Pet. 1. 17.

Endnotes

- 1 Some have argued that this is a 'plural of majesty'. The clear refutation to this, and the claim that it is angels that are included in the 'we' and 'our', can be found in ROBERT MOREY, *The Trinity: Evidence and Issues*, World Bible Publishers, 1996, pg. 94.
- 2 Ps. 40. 6; Exod. 21. 6; Phil. 2. 7.
- 3 Acts 2. 25-28.
- 4 Eph. 4. 8.
- 5 Isa. 42. 1-4; 49. 1-6; 50. 4-7; 52. 13 to 53. 12.
- 6 For example, Luke 1. 79; 2. 32; John 1. 8-10; 8. 12; 9. 5; 12. 46; Acts 26. 23.
- 7 Luke 9. 35; Matt. 17. 5; Mark 9. 7.



The widows of Luke's Gospel 4

THE WIDOW OF THE PARABLE Luke 18

By **STUART SCAMMELL** Cardiff, Wales

The widow that is presented to us in Luke chapter 18 is a determined character and will not be turned from the course of action that she has decided upon. In life we come across characters just like her. We might not share their conviction, but we must admire their determination and tenacity. The Lord taught this parable to show us the importance of prayer, and the need for persistence in prayer. The language in the opening verse is one of assumption that we ought to be a praying people. Corrie Ten Boom once asked, 'Is prayer your steering wheel or your spare tyre?'¹ We neglect prayer at our peril. It is our daily duty as well as our great privilege.

Although our Lord had perfect knowledge of all that was before Him, He still felt the need to pray. Although all power was given to Him, He still felt the need to pray. How much more should we?

The Lord warns us that it is possible to 'lose heart', 18. 1 ESV. In the previous chapter, we are told about 'the days of the Son of Man'. This phrase tells us of a time to come, when Christ's reign will be absolute, and one characterized by peace and righteousness. Yet there is a significant gap between the promise from God, who cannot lie, and its fulfilment. In the interim, the Lord encourages us not to faint or lose heart.

The Old Testament scrolls told out the coming of the Messiah and the Jewish nation lived in anticipation of these wondrous events. These prophecies were obvious to the Jewish readers although some of their great content lay dormant to most. God was silent for a 400-year period between the Old and the New Testaments and, with the passing of time, there would have been much fainting and losing of heart. Yet there were some that were notable for their watchfulness and their unwavering faith in God's promises. Among

them, we are told of the shining example of Anna and Simeon in Luke chapter 2, and of the blessing they received in seeing the Lord's Christ.

As we wait for our Lord's return, the practical parallels should be obvious. Anna and Simeon did not lose heart as they lived close to God and, through faith's eye, looked to the blessed promise of God. We should do the same.

Here, in Luke chapter 18, we are presented with a judge, a man who is influential in the city and someone who has the power to have an impact upon the lives of the citizens. This man demonstrates little care for people, taking no regard of their standing in society, their reputation, or their past record. This judge is more likely to be influenced by a bribe and has no thirst for justice. More importantly, this judge does not fear God. As we look at those around us, we see a society who 'suppress the truth in unrighteousness', Rom. 1. 18 NKJV.

We live in a society that is increasingly anti-God and disregards His standards and belittles His instructions. As the Psalmist describes in Psalm 14, they demonstrate foolishness and say in

their hearts that as far as they are concerned there is no God!

The widow in the parable knows that the judge is unjust and yet she is undeterred. She persistently brings her issue to him. She sees no other way that she can obtain any sort of justice. As you would probably imagine, the unrighteous judge is unmoved by the initial advances of the widow, hoping that she will become wearied in her asking and give up and bother him no more.

Yet we see that the widow is persistent, relentlessly asking for justice to be served. In a world that is anti-God, in which we see sin seemingly continuing unchecked, it is easy to become despondent and to ask, 'Where is God in all this?' It is good to remember that God's programme of events runs unhindered by the evil one and we are in the Day of Grace where mankind has the opportunity to turn to God as Saviour.

The widow continues undeterred with her request. The unjust judge is worn down by her persistence and so that he need not hear her repeated request day after day, he resolves to seek justice for her in the matter.

The lesson we are taught is obviously about prayer, and the encouragement to be constant and not to give up. We may well be in the last times, although this is not really for us to say. We hear people talk about decline and how things were better years ago. It is true that many regions of our country struggle with declining numbers and assemblies closing, and it is easy to be despondent and to feel like giving up. We need to have the opposite reaction and to work hard for the Lord under His direction, and to strive to know His will for us in our lives. So many so-called giants in God's service knew difficulties, hardship, and disappointment. In God's service today, we can have huge disappointments, setbacks and opposition, and it is tempting to just give up and not get involved in things that bring these discouragements. Yet the lesson that we must learn is the need to mirror this persistent widow in our prayer lives. Our prayer

lives are a huge indicator of how we are walking with God. It is possible to give up in prayer and either to cease from prayer altogether, or to become one who just 'says prayers'. It is possible to lose the passion for prayer and to forget the privilege that is ours to pray. When we pray, we are addressing a thrice holy God, the Creator of the universe who declares, 'the prayer of the upright is his delight', Prov. 15. 8. Similarly, the Apostle John reminds us, 'if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us', 1 John 5. 14. So, if we are walking closely to God and have aligned our prayers to His will, we are assured that He has heard, and it has delighted our God.

The widow presented her request again and again. What about us? Do we pray about an issue once or twice and then relegate it to the back of our mind? It is possible, of course, that we do not believe that God will intervene in a matter and our faith is too weak to envisage our prayers being answered.

The lessons that we need to learn from the widow in this parable are many. First, she was powerless to solve the matter herself, so she sought the one who could. We very often look at problems and try to resolve them ourselves. We need to recognize our weakness and turn to Almighty God.

Second, she was persistent, not giving up until her request was answered. There is no record of her dictating the answer and we need to be careful that we do not go to God in prayer with the answer, but with the problem. We can be assured that God's answer will be better than our own. Ephesians chapter 3 verse 20 reminds us that He 'is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think'.

Third, we also need to remember to whom we are praying. The unrighteous judge in the parable stands in total contrast to our Lord. Psalm 96 verse 10 states, 'He shall judge the people righteously'. And 2 Timothy chapter 4 verse 8 reinforces the point that it is 'the Lord, the righteous judge', who does right continually. The contrast could not be starker. The unrighteous judge granted the request for a quiet life but our God, who delights to hear our prayers, wants the very best for us. The widow was persistent to a Godless judge who granted her request. How much more will the loving God grant us our requests? Yet we give up too easily, and we lack faith.

As believers, we wait for the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. Yet it is possible to live as if we no longer believe the words of 1 Thessalonians chapter 4 verses 16 and 17, 'The Lord himself shall descend from heaven

with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and 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'. We need to hold on to the words at the end of verse 17 as they are of huge comfort and of eternal significance, 'We shall always be with the Lord', NKJV.

If we fail to hold these events in our hearts, then, when we face the opposition of the world, we can easily lack faith. The challenge is set out at the end of the parable. God will put the wrongs of this world right, but, when the Lord returns, 'will He really find faith on the earth?', v. 8 NKJV. This should be a huge challenge to us as we pray. Do we pray consistently? Do we pray persistently? Do we pray expectantly? Of course, we must be careful to wait on God's timing, and we are often taught much in waiting, but if we faint in prayer, we cannot expect the great blessing of God in answering our prayer. Not for the first time, God uses a poor widow to teach us profound and fundamental lessons for the Christian life.

Endnote

- 1 Found here: https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/102203.Corrie_ten_Boom



Studies in the twelve (minor) prophets

THE PROPHECY

OF JONAH

By **JOHN BENNETT** Kirkby-in-Ashfield, England

3

Few books have attracted the attention of sceptics and rationalists more than this one. The fact that a human could be swallowed by a great fish and survive has been ridiculed as fanciful. However, as MORGAN states, 'Men have been so busy with the tape measure endeavouring to find the dimensions of the fish's belly that they seem to have had no time to plumb the depths of the divine revelation'.¹ In reality, to question the authenticity of Jonah is to question the testimony of the Lord.²

Introduction

The prophecy of Jonah is remarkable in several ways:

1. Chronologically, it is the first of the twelve so-called 'minor' prophets. Although the precise date when the book was written is difficult to determine, it is likely that Jonah lived in the period when Joash and Jeroboam II reigned in Israel.³
2. It is not a prophecy that relates to Israel or Judah but an account of Jonah prophesying to Nineveh and its people. Remembering the part that the Assyrian empire played in bringing judgement upon Israel, it is remarkable to see God sending His prophet and bringing His message to its capital and its king. KELLY observes, 'There is none more intensely Jewish; yet his prophecy was addressed to the Gentiles, to the men of Nineveh in his day'.⁴
3. Whereas the message of the other prophets of the Old Testament is recorded in detail, all we know of Jonah's message is 'Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown', 3. 4. It does not matter how long or short the message may be, provided God is in it!
4. The majority of the book is narrative. In this sense, it bears some similarities with other major and minor prophets in revealing the experiences of the prophet and his relationship with God.

Jonah's place amongst the minor prophets is reinforced because the Lord clearly describes Jonah as a prophet, Matt. 12. 39, and the opening words of the book testify to that fact, 'the word of the Lord came unto Jonah the son of Amittai', 1. 1. As that phrase is repeated in chapter 3 verse 1, it reflects something of the patience of God with Jonah and yet the reality that God's will is certain.

Overall, the very practical lesson is, as Paul wrote, that God's ways are 'unsearchable . . . and . . . past finding out', Rom. 11. 33. Equally, although Peter wrote of the 'the longsuffering of God . . . in the days of Noah', 1 Pet. 3. 20, and that was for the salvation of only eight souls, in this instance we echo his later words that God 'is longsuffering . . . not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance', 2 Pet. 3. 9. The impact of Jonah's preaching was significantly greater!

Background

Although there are no explicit statements to confirm it, Jonah is generally accepted as the author of the book. From 2 Kings chapter 14 verse 25, Jonah prophesied in Israel mainly during the reign of Jeroboam the son of Joash. This makes him the earliest of the prophets, preceding Hosea and Amos who also prophesied in that period. He is described as 'the son of Amittai', v. 1, but there is no other scriptural record of his father.

His geographical base within Israel is designated as Gath-hepher, which lay further north than Nazareth in the Galilee region, called Gittahhapher, Josh. 19. 13, and on the boundary of Zebulun's territory.

Analysis and outline

The fleeing prophet – 1. 1-6

In the Lord's instruction to Jonah, vv. 1, 2, He knows all about Nineveh. In human terms, it may be a 'great city', the capital of the Assyrian Empire, renowned for its palaces, but in moral and spiritual terms the verdict is rather different. God is not interested in the architecture, Matt. 24. 1, but in the people!

However, for Jonah this command was unpalatable. As FLANIGAN writes, 'the very idea of a Hebrew prophet ministering to such a city was anathema'.⁵ Looking at the state of the nation of Israel, he may have asked himself, 'is there not a work to be done here first'? So, in disobedience, Jonah takes his downward steps to Joppa, into the ship, and into the hold of the ship.

Sometimes the commands of God will appear strange to us. Why is God taking us in a particular direction when there seems to be so many opportunities elsewhere? The reality is that, as Solomon wrote, 'no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end', Eccles. 3. 11. We may not like or understand but we must trust and obey.

The fearful sailors – 1. 7-14

These may be experienced mariners, but they had a respect for the sea and the storm. They took various steps to weather the worst of the tempest, crying to their pagan deities and lightening the ship by casting their cargo overboard. All was to no avail. Finally, 'they cast lots, and the lot fell upon Jonah', v. 7.

As Jonah reveals something of himself and his service, fear is heightened, cp. vv. 5, 10. What is remarkable is that Jonah, who knows his God, 4. 2, and knows what must be done to make the 'sea . . . calm unto you', v. 12, should ever think that he could 'flee . . . from the presence of the Lord', v. 3! Thus, at

this point, the men having rowed hard in vain, they had to agree to Jonah's instruction and cast him into the sea.

The fish prepared – 1. 15-17

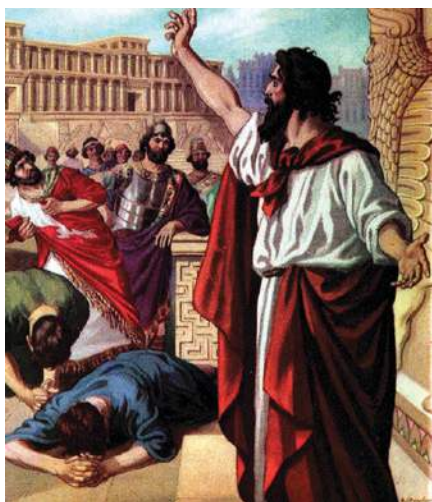
Here we should appreciate the greatness of the God whom Jonah served. Humanly speaking, to be cast into the sea in a raging storm would be a death sentence executed. The ship's crew realized this, 'let us not perish for this man's life', v. 14. However, 'the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah', v. 17 ESV. This sea creature was brought by God into the right place at the right time and, unlike Jonah, obeyed its creator's command and swallowed up Jonah!

The fainting prophet – 2. 1-10

Amid adversity, Jonah resorts to prayer. In the content of that prayer, given in verses 2 to 9, we see something of the prophet's feelings, vv. 3-7, and something of his appreciation of his God, vv. 2, 6, 9. We should not underestimate the intensity of Jonah's experience.

In thinking on that experience, we can appreciate that this chapter furnishes us with material that illustrates the experiences of the Lord at Calvary, and we might well ponder such phrases as 'all thy billows and thy waves passed over me', v. 3, and 'the depth closed me round about'.

Practically, there is much that should encourage us in our Christian life. Even in the most desperate of circumstances, we can rest in the knowledge that, 'When my soul fainted within me I remembered the Lord: and my prayer came in unto thee', v. 7. God awaits our cry, whether



to minister to us in our extremity or to restore the wanderer. Whilst 'the way of transgressors is hard', Prov. 13. 15, the way back to the Lord should not be harder.

The faithful prophet – 3. 1-5

What a blessing that 'the word of the Lord came unto Jonah the second time', v. 1. God does not give up on His prophet and we should not give up on failures, otherwise where would any of us be? At the second time of command, Jonah obeys.

The size of Jonah's task is given us in verse 3, 'Nineveh was an exceeding great city of three days' journey'. Similarly, God tells us about its population, 'more than sixscore thousand persons', 4. 11. By way of comparison, this figure is slightly less than the UK towns and cities of Cambridge, Dundee, and Newport.⁶ Remembering that he was just one man to preach throughout such a conurbation is significant, yet he went, and he cried, 'Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown', v. 4.

Though we may be faced with overwhelming need and a message that is equally unpopular, let us think upon Jonah and see what God can do, even with a man who was marked by failure.

The fasting people and the fate of Nineveh – 3. 6-10

What an impact! Jonah is possibly the most successful preacher on the page of scripture. The cry goes up from the king and is obeyed by the people as a whole, 'turn every one from his evil way, and from the violence that is in their hands', v. 8. The reality of this repentance is evidenced in that they covered themselves with sackcloth, fasted, and gave themselves to prayer. What a revival!

But this raises a question when, in verse 10, Jonah records, 'God repented of the evil, that he said he would do unto them'. Did God change His mind? FAUSSET comments, 'The reason why the announcement of destruction was made absolute, and not dependent on Nineveh's continued impenitence, was that this form was the only one calculated to rouse them . . . it was a truthful

representation of God's purpose towards Nineveh under its existing state, and of Nineveh's due. When that state ceased, a new relation of Nineveh to God . . . came in, and room was made for the word to take effect . . . Prophecy is not merely for the sake of proving God's omniscience by the verification of predictions of the future, but is mainly designed to vindicate God's justice and mercy in dealing with the impenitent and penitent respectively'.⁷

The failure of the prophet and his gourd – 4. 1-11

Far from being pleased with the outcome of his preaching, Jonah is hurt, upset and angry. The manner and content of his prayer changes dramatically. CONSTABLE notes, 'This one focuses on Jonah, but the former one on God. This one contains no fewer than nine references to "I" or "my" in the Hebrew'.⁸ In such a state, Jonah wants to end it all.

The lessons we can learn from this rather sad end to the book are of the remarkable grace of God in sending His prophet to Nineveh and the compassion He demonstrates to His prophet, even in such a low state, spiritually and mentally. Overall, and particularly in the preparation and destruction of the gourd, we need to learn to view things from God's perspective rather than our own.

Endnotes

- 1 G. CAMPBELL MORGAN, *Voices of Twelve Hebrew Prophets*, Pickering and Inglis, pg. 31.
- 2 See, for example, Matt. 12. 39-41; 16. 4; Luke 11. 29-32.
- 3 This is assumed by the only other reference to Jonah and Amittai being in 2 Kings chapter 14 verse 25, and its context.
- 4 WILLIAM KELLY, *Lectures introductory to the study of the Minor Prophets*, C. A. Hammond, pg. 206.
- 5 J. M. FLANIGAN, 'Jonah', in W. S. STEVELEY and D. E. WEST (ed.), *What the Bible Teaches*, Ritchie; *Old Testament Commentaries*, Ritchie, 2011, pg. 499.
- 6 Figures based upon a 2019 population estimate – projections derived from 2001 and 2011 census figures.
- 7 R. JAMIESON, A. R. FAUSSET, and D. BROWN, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the whole Bible*, part of e-sword software resource. See also M. HORLOCK, 'Jonah' in IVAN STEEDS (ed.), *The Minor Prophets*, Precious Seed Publications, 1992, pg. 112.
- 8 T. CONSTABLE, *Expository Notes*, part of e-sword software resource.

THE SHUNAMITE WOMAN

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Often in scripture we come across a story which bows our heart in worship as to the ways of God. Such a story is the basis of these notes. 2 Kings chapter 4 records three miracles of which the greatest is the middle one regarding this woman. We must not forget the postscript in chapter 8.

A simple outline is as follows:

- She was a great woman, v. 8.
- She had a great heart, vv. 9, 10.
- She received a great gift. A son, vv. 11-17.
- She experienced a great sorrow, vv. 18-21.
- She had a great faith, vv. 22-30.
- She had a great joy, vv. 36, 37.

Three times in the scriptures, and only in this chapter, is the statement, 'it fell on a day'. These words focus attention on the three main characters of the story:

- We are introduced to a great woman, v. 8.
- We note the expression as to the man of God, v. 9.
- We have the circumstances resulting in grief at the death of the child, v. 18.

The person she was, v. 8

The Shunammite is brought before us in comparison with the widow in the previous verses. Of the former, we know she was poor, but the Lord can meet the need of all. This lady is nameless and childless but a great woman – the only woman in scripture with this accolade. Of Nabal, it is stated in 1 Samuel chapter 25 verse 2 that he was very great but this was in relation to his prosperity. In 2 Kings chapter 5, Naaman is recorded as a great man for his prowess in battle and because he was well thought of by the king. Greatness can be classed in many ways.

Nothing is recorded as to why this unnamed woman was great. We can ponder the nature of her greatness – in chapter 8 verse 6, she owned land – but we can observe a truly

spiritual woman of distinct merit. In comparison, in chapter 5, we have an unnamed little maid who spoke about a cure for Naaman's leprosy, demonstrating that unnamed individuals can be used in God's service. In the eyes of the world we may not be known, but the Lord knows us and we can be used by Him.

The perception she had, v. 9

The woman had a spiritual perception of Elisha and refers to him as a 'holy man of God'. She noted his walk, and she would benefit from his word and his work. She knew later she could turn to him alone in difficult times.

Elisha is described as a man of God twenty-nine times in 2 Kings, and in this chapter eleven times. Something marked Elisha as a man of God. Her perception led her to give hospitality to the prophet. Over the years, many have benefited from those who have given to God's servants of their substance. What a challenge for us today! Let's remember that the world is looking on and we may be the only true believers they encounter.

The partnership with her husband, vv. 9, 10

The woman never acted on her own initiative. She told her husband about the man of God and expressed the desire to make a 'little chamber' for him, to which her husband agreed. Gehazi noted, in verse 14, that her husband was old. We can observe that her husband was not as spiritual as her, v. 23, for he asks why she would go to the man of God when it was neither new moon nor sabbath. In chapter 8, there is no mention of her husband and so we can presume he had died.

The provision that was made, v. 10

'Let us make a **little chamber**'. In the next chapter it was a **little maid** who spoke of where Naaman could receive a cure for his leprosy. The Lord can use 'little things'!

It contained the basic essentials: a bed as a place of relaxation, a table as a place of nourishment, a stool as a place for meditation and a candlestick as a place of divine illumination. In reality, nothing was spared to accommodate the man of God. Peter's exhortation to us today is, 'Use hospitality one to another without grudging', 1 Pet. 4. 9. Paul takes up the same thought, 'Given to hospitality', Rom. 12. 13.

The place she had with her own people, v. 13

She was content to 'dwell among' her 'own people'. Despite the offer to speak to the king on her behalf, she shows another characteristic – her humility. She was not interested in worldly advancement and yet in chapter 8 verse 6 the king restored to her what she had lost in the days of famine.

The predicament of the woman, vv. 13, 14

Whilst on one of his visits, Elisha asks Gehazi his servant what could be done by way of thanks to her for the kindness shown to them. Elisha approached her through his servant. When the enquiry of Elisha was made, we presume the lady was not present. Gehazi pinpoints that she is childless, so Elisha says to him, 'Call this Shunammite', v. 12. The stigma or reproach of being barren was real to her. She is in the same predicament as others mentioned in scripture, but we see the overruling hand of God in their lives.

The pronouncement that was made, v. 16

As she stood at the door, the revelation was given to her that she would embrace a son. Note her first reaction as she may have thought that all hope was gone naturally. She thought he was deluding her by telling a lie. Remember, Sarah laughed, Gen. 18. 12, when she heard she was to have a son in her old age. 'But with God all things are possible', Matt. 19. 26.

The promise Elisha made, v. 16

‘Thou shalt embrace a son’. In verse 17, she conceived, bringing much joy to the house. We are reminded of the greater promise in Isaiah chapter 7 verse 14, ‘A virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel’; God’s word will be fulfilled.

The problem she faced, vv. 18-20

Think of this family. Childless, but a child promised. A child given, but then the child dead. We are reminded of the Lord’s words to the Syrophenician woman, ‘Great is thy faith’.¹ Here, faith is tested by death. Circumstances changed suddenly. The child was taken at harvest time, normally a time of hope. Sometimes we do not understand God’s ways, yet God’s ways are always ordered by love and wisdom. The godly are not immune from the trials of life!

The plan of action by the woman, vv. 21, 22

In such a crisis, to whom could she turn? There is only one thought uppermost in her mind – ‘the man of God’. She never accused or questioned God or sought the attention of others.

She had nursed the child, but now she laid his lifeless body on the bed of the man of God and shut the door. No thought of burial for her son. There was nothing more she could do for the boy. The prophet’s chamber was the place for the body, anticipating resurrection. In all her plans she informed her husband. He was a



little perplexed, but her faith shines through, ‘It shall be well’, v. 23. The king’s business demands haste, ‘run to the man of God’, ‘slack not’, vv. 22, 24.

She must have known where he lived. The question is asked three times, ‘Is it well?’ It is asked of herself, her husband, and then the child. She answered, ‘It is well’. The Lord had not revealed it to him. We may recall the lovely hymn written by H. G. SPAFFORD after he lost his four daughters at sea, ‘It is well with my soul’.

The lack of power by Gehazi, vv. 29, 31, and 32

Gehazi was instructed by Elisha to go to the woman’s house, but he was out of touch at times like this. He had the privilege to be the servant of Elisha, but he now lacked power and expressed cold, harsh words and had no patience, v. 27. He was using another man’s tools. Much speculation has been made as to why Elisha sent him away. Suffice to say Gehazi’s work was to no avail. The woman knew where the power would come from in restoration and so would not leave the man of God.

The presence of the prophet, v. 32

The man of God had promised the child to the woman and her husband. Therefore, the woman knew that in death there was the power of resurrection. Gehazi had to express his failure. He was not a man of God, v. 31.

The prayer that was made, v. 33

Here we have the privacy of prayer, Matt. 6. 6, and the power of prayer. Elisha shut the door and prayed unto the Lord, realizing that the Lord alone could give life. The words of the prayer are not recorded but we know that prayer is heard. He made the need known to God.

The personal work of the prophet, vv. 33-35

Having shut the door, away from any distractions, he was alone with God. He identified himself with the child. Applying his mouth, eyes and hands, he stretched himself upon the child

‘and the flesh of the child waxed warm’. Then the child sneezed seven times. We know that some miracles took place immediately but on this occasion Elisha had to wait and watch and was anxious as he walked ‘to and fro’.

What a joy to read that he spoke to Gehazi who, in turn, called the woman. The boy was restored, ‘Women received their dead raised to life again’, Heb. 11. 35.

The prostration of the woman, v. 36, 37

The woman was able to take up her son. Both Gehazi and the woman saw that the child was restored. We recall the widow of Nain’s son. The Lord having raised the young man, ‘delivered him to his mother’, Luke 7. 15. No words of the woman are recorded but her thankfulness was truly seen in her prostration before Elisha, v. 37.

But that is not the end of the story.

The preservation of life to the woman and the child, 8. 1-6

Elisha never forgot the kindness of the woman. In this chapter, the Lord had called for a famine, v. 1, and its duration was for seven years. She had provided for Elisha, the man of God, in the past. Now he was to look after her in different circumstances – famine conditions.

The king talked with Gehazi, Elisha’s servant, and requested to know the great things that Elisha had done. He told him about what had taken place with the Shunammite’s son, and she must have been near at hand. He could then get a first-hand account from the woman herself. This led the king to restore to her what she had lost as a result of the famine. We are reminded that, ‘The king’s heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will’, Prov. 21. 1. The man in touch with God had restored her only son. Now the king on the throne could give instructions for the restoration of her house and her land, v. 6.

Endnote

1 Matt 15. 28.

The Life and Times of Elijah the Prophet 2

ELIJAH AND THE WIDOW OF ZEREPHATH

By **KEN TOTTON** Cambridge, England

Read 1 Kings 17. 7-24.

Earlier in the chapter, Elijah bursts upon the scene as the attentive and obedient servant of the living God. His ministry takes place amidst rampant idolatry in the northern kingdom of Israel headed up by the weak King Ahab and his wicked consort, Jezebel. A major theme traceable through these passages is the powerful, life-giving word of the Lord.¹ Elijah has faithfully delivered the dreadful message of a drought to King Ahab, in line with God's covenant judgements upon apostasy. Following that fearful edict, there follows the withdrawal of Elijah to the obscurity of Cherith and his miraculous preservation there.²

Why this strange turn of events? It is a further judgement on Israel, for physical drought is not the only, nor indeed the worst form of drought that can afflict a land. Spiritual drought is far worse. 'Behold, the days come, saith the Lord God, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord: and they shall wander from sea to sea, and from the north even to the east, they shall run to and fro to seek the word of the Lord, and shall not find it', Amos 8. 11, 12. As in the days of Samuel, 'the word of the Lord was rare in those days; there was no widespread revelation', 1 Sam. 3. 1 NKJV. Christians can experience spiritual drought. We can be surrounded by expositions of scripture, yet somehow it feels as if the Bible has nothing to say to us. In such circumstances, we need to seek the Lord, Lam. 3. 40.

God had hidden His faithful servant in a ravine near Jordan where he may remain unnoticed. It had a stream from which he could drink. There, ravens brought him food – bread and meat, morning and evening – a triumph of divine provision. The fact that the raven was classified as ceremonially unclean, according to Israel's holiness codes, Lev. 11. 15, hints that God was preparing the prophet

for a challenging extension of his ministry. God was about to sustain him in the home of a Gentile widow in Zarephath, Sidon. Similarly, the Lord opened Peter's understanding to take the gospel to the Gentile Cornelius through the vision of the unclean animals in the large sheet let down from heaven, Acts 10. 11.

But first, the brook dried up, v. 7. What a test of faith! You can be plumb centre of the will of God, yet circumstances may try your faith to breaking point. In our lives, the easy 'path of least resistance' will rarely constitute the will of God! Jonah, when sent to Nineveh, disobeyed, and found a convenient ship at Joppa, but he was sailing completely contrary to the will of God. God's way can often be the hardest, the costliest, the most humbling, and yet, paradoxically, the most blessed!

Hardships and changed circumstances should cause us to be cast upon God. Perhaps Elijah would have been like Jonah and refused to go to Zarephath if the stream had continued to flow. Again, in Acts the Lord used the vicious persecution of Saul of Tarsus to scatter His people abroad, so fulfilling their commission.³ Had life been easier, many might well have stayed at Jerusalem.

Zarephath . . . Sidon! 'I have commanded a widow woman **there** to sustain thee'. This is deep in Jezebel country! A Gentile, a widow woman to sustain him! It all seems so improbable, indeed impossible. Truly God's ways are past finding out; His ways are not ours. Note when God says 'there', vv. 4, 9 (twice). Are you where God wants you to be, however strange and unsought your circumstances may seem?

We can consider the rest of the chapter as follows:

- A desolate widow, vv. 10-13
- A daily provision, vv. 14-16
- A dead son, vv. 17-24

The widow in scripture often pictures desolation and vulnerability, with no one to provide for her. Here we observe important lessons for Elijah, specifically seclusion, humbling, and dependence.

A desolate widow

The major lesson here is that God is sovereign, and interested in individuals, even Gentiles. Let us remember that Israel was sunk in apostasy, and under divine judgement, yet a Gentile widow is singled out for blessing in Zarephath. This surely highlights the sovereign grace of God. In personal evangelism, we should never think of anyone as 'beyond the pale'. No sinner is too deep-dyed, too 'way out', to be beyond the long reach of God's mercy. Let us not fixate on numbers, size of audience, etc. God saves individuals; the Lord Jesus often dealt with individuals. As the surrounding secular culture hardens against the gospel, friendship evangelism remains a powerful means of fulfilling our great commission.

There is an instructive dispensational foregleam in the fact that God singled out a Gentile widow for blessing. Let the Lord Jesus be our infallible guide, 'I tell you of a truth, many widows were in Israel in the days of Elias, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, when great famine was throughout all the land; but unto none of them was Elias sent, save unto Sarepta, a city of Sidon, unto a woman that was a widow', Luke 4. 25, 26. It was at a time when Israel had refused God's message, and was under judgement, that God sent His prophet to the Gentile.

Likewise, Paul traces God's mercy to

Gentiles through Israel's rejection of Messiah, Jesus, Rom. 11. 11, 'I say then, Have they [unbelieving Israel] stumbled that they should fall [irretrievably]? God forbid: but rather through their fall salvation is come unto the Gentiles, for to provoke them to jealousy'. How glad, yet humble, we Gentile believers should be! Let us not boast against the Jewish people, the natural branches of the olive tree, Rom. 11. 17, 18.

A daily provision

A key lesson here is that God honours those who put His kingdom first. It was a supreme challenge for the widow to take the last morsel of food from her only child and give it to the prophet. It defied all the natural instincts of motherhood. Her situation was truly dismal, v. 12. To comply was a supreme act of faith in the word of God.

God will often challenge us to put Him first, even beyond all our natural instincts. 'Fear not', v. 13, as if to say, 'Give me everything you have, and I will give you everything you need'. A bold step of faith was required. Yet at the same time, God was prepared to reward such a venture not only on a one-off, but on an ongoing basis. She obeyed, staking everything on the reliability of the word of God, v. 15.

Are you prepared to take God at His word in some major matter of your life? CHRISTOPHER WORDSWORTH was once rector of a parish where the congregation's giving left much to be desired. Rather than scold them by

sermon, he penned a beautiful hymn in praise of God the eternal Giver.

'We lose what on ourselves we spend,
We have as treasure without end
Whatever Lord to thee we lend,
Who givest all'.

Verse 14 teaches the principle of **sufficiency**: the barrel of meal was never filled, but it never failed. In that sense, God's mercy was 'new every morning'. We may not have abundance, but we will have enough. 'Having food and clothing, with these we shall be content', 1 Tim. 6. 8 NKJV. What was merely a handful to the widow was a barrel as far as the living God was concerned. She thus began a journey of faith which would culminate in the death and restoration of her only son. In that respect, we might compare her spiritual growth 'now . . . I know', 1 Kgs. 17. 24, to that of Abraham the father of believers, both Jew and Gentile, Gen. 22. 12.

A dead son

That life should be preserved under conditions of dearth was amazing, but what if death were to enter the home? Now perplexing questions arise, mainly beginning with the word 'why?' Why should God work a miracle every morning, but now allow this lad to die? Why preserve life simply to snuff it out? The Lord may permit circumstances to develop in our lives which will test our faith to the uttermost, John 11. 4, 'When Jesus heard that, he said, This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God,

that the Son of God might be glorified thereby'.

God often publicly vindicated Elijah in emphatic fashion, yet sometimes his private experiences seemed far more of a struggle. It is often thus for servants of God, preventing them from presuming upon God's grace. Past victories are no guarantee of present power and grace.

The man of God carried the dead son up to his chamber, 1 Kgs. 17. 19. He entered into the widow's despair⁴ and channelled it into prevailing prayer. He was bold, accusatory, almost provocative, v. 20.

'Is any among you afflicted? let him pray', Jas. 5. 13. Rain had been withheld through prayer, Jas. 5. 17; now life was restored through prayer. Moreover, prophets often acted out their ministries in dramatic fashion. Elijah's stretching himself upon the child was an act of faith, as if pleading 'let his lifeless body become as my living body', but at the same time admitting his own helplessness, completely cast upon God's mercy and power. Similarly, we are utterly dependent on God for the salvation of souls. The son is restored to life only through deep prayer-exercise on the part of Elijah, 1 Kgs. 17. 20, 21. 'The Lord **listened** to the voice of Elijah', v. 22 ESV. What an encouragement!

The widow's faith triumphed, v. 24; she now proved that God's word is utterly reliable. He is faithful to His every promise, irrespective of how dark things may seem. God is victor not only over **dearth**, vv. 1-16, but also over **death**, vv. 17-24, so we may trust Him fully, and serve Him with total confidence.

So, whether it be a desolate widow sustained by a daily provision, or indeed a dead son brought back to life, in each case the instrument is the infallible, invincible word of the Lord. May we learn to have total confidence in the trustworthiness of God's word.

Endnotes

- 1 See 'the word of the Lord', 16. 34; 17. 2, 8, 16, 24; 18. 1.
- 2 Cherith means 'cutting off', 'separation'.
- 3 Acts. 8. 1-4.
- 4 Rom. 12. 15.



UPLIFTER

By **DAVID BRAUCH** Wauwatosa, USA

The greatest promoter of his time was Phineas Taylor Barnum. He lived in America from 1810 to 1891 and was an American showman, businessman, and politician remembered for promoting celebrated hoaxes, and founding the Barnum and Bailey Circus (1871–2017) with James Anthony Bailey. He is supposed to have said, 'I am a showman by profession . . . and all the gilding shall make nothing else of me'.¹

Today, self-promotion is rampant. Entertainers, sports figures, and politicians lead the way. There are many training courses focused on doing just that. College graduates, and business people in general, concentrate on selling themselves and their skills to advanced training schools and/or business executives. In the religious realm, the Roman Catholic priest, Norman Vincent Peale, and pastor Robert Schuller taught the skill of individuals promoting themselves in their own thinking.

It is remarkable that this subject is addressed in the Bible also. However, the focus is on the Godhead engaged in graciously elevating or lifting-up some humans. Scripture's historical and poetic books feature the life and the writings of King David. He reaches these conclusions, 'But thou, O Lord, art a shield for me; my glory, and the lifter up of mine head', Ps. 3. 3. 'He delivereth me from mine enemies: yea, thou liftest me up above those that rise up against me: thou hast delivered me from the violent man', 18. 48. 'I will extol thee, O Lord; for thou hast lifted me up, and hast not made my foes to rejoice over me', 30. 1.



David also observed that there were certain types of individuals or groups of humans who were candidates for uplifting. He states, 'He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth the needy out of the dunghill', 113. 7.²

Self-elevation and self-promotion are practised by mankind, but not by our Lord; predictions made about His coming in the Old Testament preclude any such talk. Isaiah states, 'He shall not cry, nor lift up, nor cause his voice to be heard in the street', 42. 2. HENRY writes that unlike when 'great princes ride in progress or make a public entry', our Lord was prophesied to 'have no trumpet sounded before him nor any noisy retinue to follow him'.³

However, during His earthly ministry our Lord performed a lot of 'lifting up' – physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Early in His earthly ministry, He physically raised Peter's mother-in-law up, who immediately ministered to the Lord, Luke 4. 38, 39.

When He and Peter, James, and John descended from the mountain where He was transfigured, He was confronted with a difficult case. The rest of the disciples had unsuccessfully attempted to cast from a boy a deaf and dumb (evil) spirit who had attempted to destroy him by casting him into fires or deep water. 'When Jesus saw that the people came running together, he rebuked the foul spirit, saying unto him, Thou dumb and deaf spirit, I charge thee, come out of him, and enter no more into him. And the spirit cried, and rent him sore, and came out of him: and he was as one dead; insomuch that many said, He is dead. But Jesus took

him by the hand, and lifted him up; and he arose', Mark 9. 25-27. However, nothing compared with the raising of the dead. Reflect on His ministry with the widow's son in Nain or that with His friend Lazarus.

Finally, recall our Lord's intention to raise up those whom the Father has given Him, 'And this is the Father's will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day . . . No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day . . . Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day', John 6. 39, 44, 54.

Sadly, it was prophesied by King David that a close companion of the Son of David would betray Him, 'Yea, mine own familiar friend, in whom I trusted, which did eat of my bread, hath lifted up his heel against me', Ps. 41. 9. John chapter 13 verse 18 is the fulfilment. Equally, our Lord was not 'caught unawares' by His being 'lifted up'. He shared with Nicodemus the analogy with Moses' raising up the snake in the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land, John 3. 14. He also stated the ultimate purpose and significance of His being thus raised, 'And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me', John 12. 32.

However, the Father's sovereign purpose was to have His Son raised from the dead, ascended to heaven, and highly exalted and seated in glory at His right hand, Phil. 2. 9. Ephesians chapter 2 verses 4 to 6 state the ultimate uplifting that the Father had in mind for believers, 'But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) and hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus'.

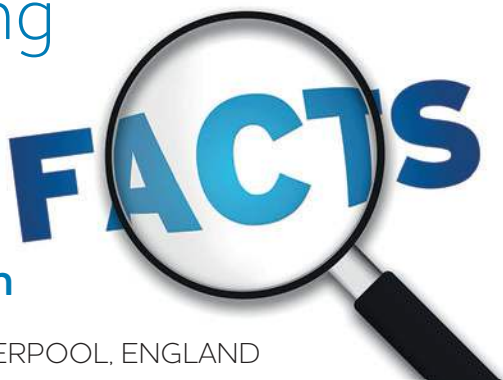
Endnotes

- 1 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/P._T._Barnum.
- 2 See also Ps. 145. 14; 147. 6.
- 3 MATTHEW HENRY, *Commentary on the Scriptures*, e-sword resource.

YOUNG PRECIOUS SEED

is a supplement of *Precious Seed*, designed for those young in the faith. Its purpose is to restate timeless truths from the word of God for a new generation of Christians and to kindle a biblical approach to current issues in the world in which we live. YPS is published by *Precious Seed*, 34 Metcalfe Avenue, Killamarsh, Sheffield, S21 1HW, UK, and is available separately from the main magazine.

Fascinating Facts – Evidence from nature of a Creator's touch



PHIL ARMSTRONG, LIVERPOOL, ENGLAND

Most will remember 'The Ugly Duckling' by HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN, the tale of the duck foster family that raised an unattractive youth, only for it to transform into a beautiful swan! In biology, this is an example of 'brood parasitism' and perhaps the best-known example is the common cuckoo (*Cuculus canorus*), the only British bird not to rear its own young. It lays its egg in the nest of another bird, such as the reed warbler (*Acrocephalus scirpaceus*), which will incubate it and eventually feed an insatiable young cuckoo. (This practice of lazy but intelligent mothers, is actually relatively uncommon in swans, unless breeding in dense colonies or crowded nesting sites, but who am I to spoil a good story?)

Amazingly, while host parents lay a wide variety of egg colours and patterns, each cuckoo has the ability to lay an egg with similar spots and squiggles, so that it looks just like the host eggs! What is particularly upsetting is that a newly hatched cuckoo chick, even while still naked and blind, will push other eggs and other newly hatched chicks right out of the nest! It can then have all the parents' attention for itself. Lots of host parents are very good at spotting the unwelcome cuckoo egg and will push it out of the family nest, but some don't seem to notice the freeloader.

Surely this demonstrates the truths of the early chapters of Genesis. The intelligence and ingenuity of the cuckoo shows evidence of God's design; especially in how these behaviours are encoded in the bird's DNA. But we also see evidence of the Fall, and the effect of sin on the wider creation, causing the use of selfish and destructive tactics in the struggle for survival. Researching the behaviour of brood parasites caused one journalist, JESSE GREENSPAN, to comment that they 'are basically born evil'.

Allow me to finish on a happy note and introduce to you the 'superb fairy wren' (*Malurus cyaneus*) from Australia. They teach their embryonic chicks a password by singing to them while they are still inside the egg. When the chicks have hatched, only those that can repeat the password will be fed. Cuckoos are not able to learn the password. I hope you agree that only God could implement this.

The 'superb fairy wren'



Editor's Introduction

I love reading biographies and so I am looking forward to seeing the different people Jeremy Singer focuses on in this series of *Saints'* CVs. The scripture calls us to imitate those who follow the example of the Lord Jesus Christ. There might just be one feature of their life that stands out, but what a blessing if it helps us be more like our Saviour.

Hopefully some of you will have spotted that we are trying to promote YPS articles on social media. Many people overseas read *Precious Seed* and YPS online. If you enjoy an article why not share it with a friend? You never know, it could be a real help to them.

Yours through grace,

Stephen Baker

Foster mum (reed warbler) raises the large cuckoo chick.



MUM!!!
Where's my
lunch?
MUM!!!



Sources

'The Brilliant Ways Parasitic Birds Terrorize Their Victims' by JESSE GREENSPAN
<https://www.audubon.org/news/the-brilliant-ways-parasitic-birds-terrorize-their-victims> (Accessed 14/02/2023)

'Fairy wren embryos found able to discern between adult calls' by BOB YIRKA
<https://phys.org/news/2014-10-fairy-wren-embryos-discern-adult.html> (Accessed 14/02/2023)

Plotting your path through life – Knowing the will of God Part 1

BY PHILIP RAGGETT, PRESTWICH, MANCHESTER, ENGLAND



How a Christian can know the will of God is both an easy and a difficult question to answer! The easy part is that God's will is clearly stated on a number of occasions in scripture without ambiguity. The difficult part is when it comes to making specific choices in life in relation to big decisions we have to make, like where we should live, what career we should pursue or who we should marry.

To try and give some guidance on this subject we will look at it under three headings: the prescribed will of God; His permissive will (Part 1); and His particular will for my life. The final heading and some principles in relation to knowing the will of God will be dealt with in Part 2.

The Prescribed Will of God

To know God's will, we should start by seeing what the scriptures say. Within His word God has given us clear commands or precepts, leaving us in no doubt about what He wants us to do. If you search the Bible for 'the will of God', you will find verses like these: 'this is the will of God, even your sanctification', 1 Thess. 4. 3; 'in every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you', 1 Thess. 5. 18. We also have commands such as 'be ye holy', 1 Pet. 1. 16; 'be not conformed to this world', Rom. 12. 2; 'be kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another', Eph. 4. 32. Then there are commands that the Lord gave to His disciples that apply to us today; for example, in John chapter 13 verse 34 the Lord commanded them to 'love one another'. In the great commission they were told to make disciples and baptize them, Matt. 28. 19. From these verses we know that God's will for believers is for them to be baptized, to live holy and sanctified lives, to be kind and loving to other believers and to have a forgiving spirit. These commands are non-negotiable, and it should be our aim to have the spirit of Mary in John chapter 2 verse 5, 'whatsoever he saith unto you, do it'.

In addition to the clear commands, God has given principles in His word that can help us to decide what His will is. There are scriptures that clearly teach that we should: serve God with 'reverence and godly fear', Heb. 12. 28; honour God in our lives, 1 Sam. 2. 30; seek to please Him in what we do, 1 John 3. 22; be modest in our appearance, 1 Tim. 2. 9; 'abstain from all appearance of evil', 1 Thess. 5. 22; not forsake the gatherings of the Lord's people, Heb. 10. 25; our assembly gatherings should be marked by decency and order, 1 Cor. 14. 40. These are just a few examples where God has given us principles to guide us in the decisions that we make. Although they are more general, and thus are more subjective, they can still help us know what God's will would be in a particular situation. In light of these scriptures, we should challenge ourselves by asking some simple questions to help us decide what we should do:

Will it bring honour to God? Will it please Him? Is what I am wanting to wear modest? Will my decision prevent me from getting to the meeting? Does it have the appearance of something wrong?

We have also been given examples or patterns of behaviour in the scriptures which show us what believers did. These can help us to know how God wants us to respond if we are faced with similar circumstances. God has left these examples on record for us to seek to emulate, 1 Cor. 11. 1. For example, Paul in Acts chapter 20 verse 6 arranged his travel plans so as not to miss gathering with the Lord's people on the first day of the week. This is a pattern that we would do well to imitate in our lives.

The Permissive Will of God

The second aspect of the will of God is in relation to circumstances that God permits in our lives. At times we are called to go through trials to test our faith, 1 Pet. 1. 7, or to develop Christian character, Rom. 5. 3. These are often situations we would not choose for ourselves, however, God in His wisdom allows them for our eternal good. It is not always easy to cope with trials but remember that it is always safe to trust Him.

We should seek to learn from the experiences we are called to pass through, and we should be willing to listen to, and take advice from, godly saints who God has entrusted with our care, Heb. 13. 17.

To be continued



Soul Searching Scriptures

BY STUART SCAMMELL, CARDIFF, WALES

The Bible is unlike any other book, it is God's inspired word and is dynamic. A verse that we may have read many times before can suddenly hit us and cut us to the heart, cause our lives to change or suddenly give us the supernatural peace that only comes from God. At other times a verse can be used in a more slow-burning way. Some of my earliest memories are of the Gospel Hall in Cwmbran where I grew up. Above the platform, arching across nearly the whole wall, was Ephesians chapter 2 verse 8, 'By grace are ye saved through faith'. Many times, when I should have been listening, I was distracted. I would count the letters, then the vowels, work out which letter was the centre one, and sometimes I would just appear to be listening, while I was actually far away, lost in my imagination. But the verse was always there, in giant writing on the wall, so very hard to ignore. God didn't let me ignore it; I grew to understand it, and along with this knowledge the realisation that I was a sinner who needed the Saviour, whom I didn't deserve, but God by His grace had given His Son Jesus Christ.

As I read the verse, I became distinctly aware of a question that could be formed by extracting three words from the verse, 'are ye saved'. I realized that I wasn't and that I really needed to be. At the age of just seven, I put my faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, repenting of my sin and trusting what the Lord Jesus Christ did at Calvary. It was a life-changing moment and, in fact, eternity changing too.

As I went through my teenage years, many verses challenged and encouraged me about baptism, living for God and being consistent in my Christian life. I was a painfully shy teenager and struggled to tell others the great news that had changed me. How could I fulfil the great commission and be effective in taking the gospel far and wide? The more I contemplated this, the more challenged I became because the verse I was contemplating, Mark 16: 15, started with 'Go'. Yet with a few inspiring exceptions, I could see that the pattern generally that was being followed was 'stay in your halls and preach the gospel to all the families that already know it'. The lack of effectiveness was being perpetuated by the style of outreach

that reached out to few and didn't really challenge me to overcome my shyness and to become bold in telling out the gospel. I did try to tell my closest friends, but often I would not be as bold as I should have been and found myself making excuses for why we didn't do certain things. Having asked God for help and opportunities to preach the gospel to the people that I knew, I let my 'fear of men' get the better of me and my desire to fit in seemed much more important than my desire to tell out the gospel. Yet afterwards I would feel so ashamed, just like Peter whose eyes met the Lord's after he had denied ever knowing Him. I don't think he ever forgot that moment and it influenced the rest of his life. Peter went from that moment of cowardice to being the lead preacher in Acts 2 before massive crowds and was used wonderfully by God to bring thousands to salvation.

What about me? What was going to turn me from cowardice? I read Acts chapter 5 verse 41 where the apostles rejoiced that, 'they were counted worthy to suffer for [Christ's] name'. Suddenly it struck me, the Lord Jesus was not immune from the pain and the hurt of the rejection of those around Him. Yet He went through all that because He wanted to see people saved from their sin and be able to be with Him eternally. The pain that He went through on the cross to enable our salvation was infinitely greater than any rejection I would know. I needed to change my attitude and be more like the apostles and although I would know rejection, I should look at it positively. Instead of being far away from Jesus Christ, I was now suffering like Him, albeit in a small way, because I belonged to Him. He is my Saviour and Lord. The more I thought that I was associated with the name of the Lord Jesus and all the blessings that were being heaped upon me, the more I wanted to tell others. I still failed, I still let cowardice overwhelm me at times, yet over the years I have, through His strength, become bolder and now spend my life telling out His wonderful message of salvation.



Saints' CVs: Introduction

BY JEREMY SINGER, BRIDGE OF WEIR, SCOTLAND

We'll consider more recent believers in future *Saints' CVs*, but for this initial article we will look back at three individuals from the Middle Ages.

The problem with medieval times is the difficulty of separating fact from fiction. Any surviving records are unreliable. We have utmost confidence in inspired biblical authors, but we should be much more cautious when we read about church history.

BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX

1090-1153 | Nationality: French

We sing translations of some of Bernard's Latin hymns today – songs like 'Jesus the very thought of Thee' and 'Jesus Thou joy of loving hearts'. He relinquished a huge family fortune to become a monk. Despite rampant church corruption in the Middle Ages, Bernard preached fervently about the love of God. He wrote a commentary on the Song of Solomon. Martin Luther cited Bernard of Clairvaux as an early influence on reformation thinking.

Bernard's teaching is controversial in places, such as his view of Mary the mother of the Lord, and his support for military campaigns like the second crusade. However, Bernard's obvious love for the Lord comes across in his writings that survive today.

FAMOUS QUOTE: Bernard said,

'It is better to drink from the source itself than from the many streams'. The source to which he refers is the Lord Jesus: 'Thou fount of life, Thou life of men . . . We turn unfilled to Thee again'.



JULIAN OF NORWICH

1343-1416? | Nationality: English

With a name like Julian of Norwich, readers of Enid's Blyton's Famous Five series might mistakenly think this believer was a man; actually, Julian was a female Christian who lived a solitary existence. While she was seriously ill, Julian had a powerful experience of the nearness of God. She wrote a book called *Revelations of Divine Love*, which is probably the earliest work of English literature by a female author.

Again, we might disagree with Julian in much of her mystic theology. However, her love for the Lord Jesus is the key theme that pervades her writing.

FAMOUS QUOTE: Julian said,

'All shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well'. Like Paul, Rom. 8. 28, Julian had supreme confidence in divine sovereignty.



RICHARD OF CHICHESTER

1197-1253 | Nationality: English

Orphaned as a child, Richard was educated at Oxford University, where eventually he became the university chancellor. Later he was appointed as a bishop. Richard was keen to root out corruption in the church. His tomb was destroyed in the English reformation on the orders of Thomas Cromwell.

FAMOUS QUOTE: Richard said,

Richard's well-known prayer, perhaps uttered on his deathbed, was: 'May I know Thee more clearly, love Thee more dearly, and follow Thee more nearly'. This would be an excellent sentiment in our prayers, every day of our lives.



WORD FOR TODAY

By **BRIAN CLATWORTHY** Newbury, England

Paropsidos (A side-dish)

Parrësia (Confidence, boldness, openness, freedom of speech)

Eparrēsiasato (To speak freely or preach boldly)

One of the things that is highly prized in a democratic society is freedom of speech and action. In some countries this is enshrined in law, e.g., Article 10 of the Human Rights Act 1998 or the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. These enactments give the individual citizen the power or right to express their own opinions. But, like all legal powers, they are subject to certain limitations. The Greek noun **parrësia** knows no such restrictions as it expresses the confidence and freedom not only to act but to speak plainly and openly with boldness and without constraint.

The Greek word **parrësia** is used sparingly in the Septuagint (LXX) and in the majority of occurrences it has no equivalent Hebrew word. In Leviticus chapter 26 verse 13 LXX, it is used to express the openness of Israel's redemption by God from Egyptian bondage and is a mark of free people. In Job chapter 27 verse 10 LXX, the word is used to indicate that an impious man has forfeited all his right or freedom to call upon God. This is contrasted with Job whose openness before God was exemplary. 'An important aspect is **parrësia** towards God, and God Himself is the source of **parrësia**'.¹ It is also used of wisdom crying aloud with confidence in the busy streets and at the entrance of the gates in the city, Prov. 1. 20 LXX. In the letter of Aristee to Philocrates, which is a Hellenistic text dated sometime around the 3rd or early 2nd century BC, we read at page 125, 'since friends unreservedly, **parrësia**, offer advice for one's best interest'.² In other non-biblical literature, **parrësia** came to mean 'candour' as in the Jewish writings of Philo and Josephus. In classical Greek, 'freedom of speech' was a democratic right.³

It is in the New Testament, however, that the noun **parrësia** comes into its

own where it occurs thirty-one times and the verb **parrēsiasazomai** nine times. The word is associated with John's account of our Lord's ministry as He carries out His work publicly and not in secret, 7. 25, 26; 18. 20, 21. Notice the contrast between the phrases **en kryptō** (in secret) and **en parrësia** (openly), commonly seen throughout the Gospel narratives, e.g., John 18. 20. When our Lord contemplates going to the Feast of Tabernacles, His brothers suggest to Him that 'No-one who wants to become a public figure acts in secret', 7. 4 NIV. In essence, their advice to Him was to seize the opportunity and declare Himself as the Messiah in Jerusalem, if He was indeed the Messiah. Our Lord rejects their advice because it was not the right time to make a public declaration, 7. 6-8, cp. v. 26. It would be later when He openly declared Himself to the world by being lifted up upon a cross, John 12. 32.

Another feature of the word **parrësia** is that it not only gives prominence to speaking openly but clearly and plainly, without ambiguity or allegorically, John 10. 24, 25; 11. 14; 16. 29. It thus contrasts with the word **paroimia** in chapter 16 verse 29. Although our Lord did speak in parables to the world it was to effect faith in those who truly sought Him. As VERLYN D. VERBRUGGE points out, 'Hence there is a tension between **parrësia** and **paroimia**, which corresponds to the Johannine dualism of life and death, truth and the lie, etc., which demands a decision and can only be resolved by faith'.⁴

The apostles inherited this confidence and boldness in their preaching as they proclaimed the gospel throughout the Graeco-Roman world to both Jews and Gentiles. In Acts chapter 4 verse 13 when the crowds observed the boldness, **parrësia**, of Peter and John, they were astonished at their ability to sustain such arguments before the Sanhedrin. Their forcefulness and confidence to preach in this way was not, of course, in their own strength but by the prompting of the Holy Spirit, Acts 4. 8, 29, 31. Even when Paul was a prisoner in Rome he preached the

kingdom of God and taught about Christ, 'with all freedom of speech', **parrësia**, and without hindrance, **akōlytōs**, Acts 28. 31.⁵

Paul again refers to this boldness when at Thessalonica despite the physical and mental sufferings he had previously endured in Philippi, 1 Thess. 2. 2. He attributes this courage to the 'help of our God' NEB. Other similar uses by Paul of **parrësia** can be found, for example, in Philemon verse 8 where he suggests that he could be 'bold' in Christ but preferred on this occasion to appeal to Philemon on the basis of love. Other New Testament writers use **parrësia** to emphasize that the future should be approached with confidence and boldness, not with uncertainty, Heb. 3. 6; 10. 35; 1 John 2. 28. Believers have the same confidence, **parrësia**, in approaching God, Heb. 10. 19, and seeking His help in prayer, 1 John. 5. 14.

There are many other references to the noun **parrësia** confirming this sense of boldness and confidence which can be ours as believers in preaching the word of God, in our communion with God and our assurance of future blessing. May we be faithful in our service to God and gain great assurance in our faith in Christ, 1 Tim. 3. 13.

For further reading/study

Introductory

Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words by W. E. VINE, pg. 138.

Advanced

Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (Abridged in One Volume) by GEOFFREY W. BROMLEY, pp. 794, 795.

Endnotes

- 1 GEOFFREY W. BROMLEY, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Abridged in One Volume), pg. 794.
- 2 H. MOULTON and G. MILLIGAN, *The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament*, pg. 497.
- 3 F. F. BRUCE, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary, pg. 121.
- 4 *The NIV Theological Dictionary of New Testament Words*, pg. 981.
- 5 The Greek word **akōlytōs** (hindrance) only occurs here in the New Testament and is a legal term and speaks of the triumphant note on which it brings the Acts of the Apostles to a close (J. H. MOULTON and G. MILLIGAN, *The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament*, pg. 20). Both words **parrësia** and **akōlytōs** emphasise the liberty that the Holy Spirit brings to believers, 2 Cor. 3. 17.

The brides of scripture 2

REBEKAH

By **JONATHAN BLACK** Bicester, England

I am sure every believer looks forward to the blessed day when they will get their first glimpse of Christ. That is the truth depicted typically in the second of this series on the brides of scripture. Genesis chapter 24 is the first recorded courtship and marriage in the Bible and points typically to the day when Christ will come to take the church, His bride, to be with Himself. The first bride, Eve, appreciated the invisible wound inflicted on Adam in order to become his bride, but Rebekah will value the visible wealth of the son in whose blessings she will share. Practically, it lays down principles for God's guidance in marriage, but is not a licence to enter into marriage without meeting and getting to know one another first.

The sacrifice that revealed a bride

The first mention of Rebekah is found in Genesis chapter 22 verse 23. In the shadow of the altar on Mount Moriah, news has reached Abraham that Bethuel, his nephew has a daughter called Rebekah. This future bride for his beloved son is linked typically to Isaac by 'the cross'. The typical outline of God's purposes for Israel and the church can be traced through chapter 23 where Sarai is set aside in death, just like Israel who have been set aside awaiting judgement as the unfaithful wife of Jehovah. They are typically taken up again in chapter 25, just as Abraham takes up another wife, Keturah. Between them is chapter 24, the longest in Genesis, where we find this beautiful picture of the church as the bride of Christ.

The father who required a bride

Genesis chapter 24 begins with blessing, 'And Abraham was old, and well stricken in age: and the Lord had blessed Abraham in all things'. The word 'blessed' is used six times throughout the chapter, a reminder that the spiritual blessings of the church, the bride of Christ, originate with God and are found in Christ alone, Eph. 1. 3. In chapter 25 verse 11, Isaac is blessed by God as he returns to Lahairoi, with his new bride, the place he left to come and fetch her.

Abraham must have been about 140 years old now, because Isaac was forty, Gen. 25. 20. His advanced age would have made a journey back to the city of Nahor (500 miles each way) for a bride for Isaac virtually impossible. He decides to send his more experienced servant to ensure that Isaac would get a wife that is not of the Canaanites. This unnamed servant is probably Eliezer, mentioned in chapter 15 verse 2, who, after fifty-five years has experience and has built up trust with his master, and promises to be faithful by placing his hand under his master's thigh. Abraham sets out clearly the requirements for his servant and reminds him of the importance God placed on the seed, 'Unto thy seed will I give this land', 24. 7.

Viewed through natural eyes, the servant reasoned that no woman would want to follow him back to the land of Canaan, but Abraham's faith was now well-developed, having passed the test of Moriah, and he knew exactly what God was capable of. If the woman would not follow the servant, Abraham said, 'then thou shalt be clear', v. 8. When God guides us by His word, we should be equally clear in discerning what is His will and what is not.

The servant who recognized the bride

The timing

How will this servant recognize the

bride? The servant is a vivid picture of the Holy Spirit, who came down in God's time at Pentecost to call out a bride for His Son. God's guidance in the timing of this servant is perfect. The master had put all his goods in 'his hand', 24. 10, but his times were in God's hand, Ps. 31. 15. The servant's path would cross with Rebekah's at 'the time' when women come out to draw water.

The truth

Jesus Christ said of the Holy Spirit, 'he, the Spirit of truth . . . will guide you into all truth', John 16. 13, but He also taught the importance of asking in order that you might receive, v. 23. The servant asks God to shew him which woman is the chosen bride by her words. We should never underestimate the importance of prayer and asking in faith to seek God's mind. In Romans chapter 8 verse 27, we read of 'the mind of the Spirit . . . [who] maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God'.

The servant met Rebekah at a well, one of a number of wells in Isaac's life, each with a spiritual lesson. The lesson in this well is God's leading in truth, 'Blessed be the Lord God of my master Abraham, who hath not left destitute my master of his mercy and his truth: I being in the way, the Lord led me', v. 27. What way? The only way, the way of obedience and faith. Knowing God's will is not having a huge blueprint for the years ahead but a simple daily trust and obedience to God's word. Before the servant finishes praying, Rebekah appears at the well and is noted for her birth, beauty, purity, and strength. Rebekah carried fifty gallons of water, supplying all ten camels. She certainly had the strength of the virtuous woman, Prov. 31. 17, who 'strengtheneth her arms', and 'looketh well to the ways of her household', v. 27. But who was this woman? Her identity would be forever linked with something very precious.

The treasure

One of the great features of this chapter is the wealth that the servant had in his possession. Four of the nine mentions of gold in Genesis are found in this chapter

alone. The golden earring or face jewel must have impressed Rebekah, 24. 22, and it certainly caught Laban's eye, v. 30, but the objective of the wealth bestowed upon Rebekah and her family was to increase her faith in the report from the servant concerning Abraham and Isaac. As the bride of Christ, the Holy Spirit has revealed to us that in Christ are 'hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge', Col. 2. 3, and our access to the unsearchable riches of Christ is through faith in God's word. Rebekah's faith would come by hearing and hearing by the word of God. As Laban and Bethuel recognized that all they saw was of God, they were not going to stand in the way of Rebekah going to claim her inheritance in the son, v. 51. The servant is caused to worship God as he realizes he has secured the bride longed for by his master.

The son who returned for his bride

Rebekah is now consulted and this beautiful daughter, so able, willing, and attentive to her parents, will be snatched out of her world into the world of a man she has never seen. From Isaac's standpoint, she will be fetched, just as Christ will come to take and receive His bride, yet Rebekah will never be Isaac's unless she is willing to go. She responds like every true believer who enters into the spiritual blessings found alone in Christ,

saying, 'I will go', Gen. 24. 58. She leaves with the purpose of it all ringing in her ears, 'be thou the mother of thousands of millions', 24. 60.

It is interesting that the servant says, 'send me away that I may go to my master', v. 56, and not to Isaac. When she says, 'I will go', she is agreeing to become Abraham's gift to Isaac, just as in Christ, we are 'heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ', Rom. 8. 17. Her journey on the camels must have been bumpy, but the anticipation of the bridegroom would make every bump one step closer to Isaac. As they meet, it is Rebekah who asks who the man is who comes to meet them. Isaac knows who she is – no doubt the occupation of his meditation in the field. He is watching for one bride alone, and the camels catch his eye because verse 61 mentions that Rebekah 'rode upon the camels'. However, let us not forget the servant in the midst of this glorious meeting. In Revelation chapter 22 verse 17, 'the Spirit and the bride say, Come'. Rebekah follows the servant just as the Holy Spirit guides us to the Father's house. However, she does not follow all the way, for the bridegroom has come to meet her and receive his bride. She has made herself ready, taking a veil and covering herself, while he would notice she was displaying the riches that had come from his father's house. Now she gets that blessed first glimpse of the one in whom all her wealth and love is found.

The sight of a remarkable bride

This bride is remarkable in two ways. First, Rebekah, while never seen by Isaac, becomes the object of his love. It is his love for her that is declared in verse 67, yet there is no doubt she loved him, for she was linked with him in spirit until the day when her faith gave way to sight. We too love Christ 'because he first loved us', 1 John 4. 19. She would no doubt spend many days at his feet learning of the altar, the lamb, and the ram that God provided at Mount Moriah.

Second, we never read of Rebekah's death, typical of the eternal bride of Christ who will enter into an eternal city where there is no death, no pain, and no parting, but to enjoy 'fellowship sweet as we kneel at His feet and the lover of sinners adore' for evermore. Isaac was comforted, v. 67, for 'the comforter' had secured a chaste bride to God's holy satisfaction.

O the blessed joy of meeting,
All the desert past;
O the wondrous words of greeting,
He shall speak at last!
He and I together ent'ring
The fair realm above;
He and I together sharing
All the Father's love.

[GERHARDT TERSTEEGEN
(1697-1769)]



Pauline metaphors In the marketplace

By **KEITH R. KEYSER** Gilbertsville, USA

Part 6

Like the modern scene, the New Testament world was filled with diverse worldviews. Many religions and philosophies vied for supremacy in public affairs and private devotion. Originally popularized by the American Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, J., the phrase 'the marketplace of ideas' frequently appears in discussions of free speech and competing concepts in education.¹ Fittingly, Paul contended for the faith in literal marketplaces like the one in Athens, but also used this metaphor to express the saint's identity in Christ.

From slave to freeman

Slavery is one of the New Testament's prevalent metaphors. The slave market's vocabulary describes mankind's enforced servitude; yet Christ delivers by redemption. Before belief in the Lord Jesus, humans are in bondage to sin and unrighteousness, Rom. 6. 6-14. But His saving work, effected by His death and resurrection, emancipates believers from these old masters, and transforms them into His servants, vv. 17-23. Their lives now belong to God and have been purchased by Him for freedom and holy service, Gal. 5. 1-6. As 1 Corinthians chapter 6 verse 20 says, 'For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's' NKJV. The next chapter agrees, 'You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men', 7. 23 NKJV. The marketplace language of purchase reveals divine ownership, resulting in a new, holy identity for believers.

Trading ideas as well as goods

Beyond the Christian's position, the New Testament uses the marketplace to discuss the conflict between the gospel and pagan beliefs. In the Graeco-Roman world, the marketplace was an open space for commerce, politics, and intellectual interchange. Athens was past its glory days as the centre of learning, yet it still had a venerable tradition in intellectual pursuits. Besides Epicureans and Stoics, Paul faced

various types of idolators. A Roman satirist asserted that it was easier to encounter a god there than a man!² Accordingly, it was an excellent location for Paul to evangelize, as Acts chapter 17 verses 17 and 18 demonstrate, "Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshippers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there. Then certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him. And some said, "What does this babblers want to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods," because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection' NKJV.

A Christian philosopher notes the connections to classical thought:

'Paul's evangelistic method was always suited to the local conditions – and portrayed with historical accuracy by Luke. In Ephesus Paul taught in the "school of Tyrannus", but in Athens his direct approach to the heathen was made in the marketplace. Paul had already approached the unbelieving Jews and God-fearing Gentiles at the synagogue in Athens. Now he entered the marketplace of ideas to "reason with" those who met him there. The Greek word for Paul's activity recalls the "dialogues" of Plato wherein Socrates discusses issues of philosophical importance; it is the same word used by Plutarch for the teaching methods of a peripatetic philosopher. Paul did

not simply announce his viewpoint; he discussed it openly and gave it a reasonable defense. He aimed to educate his audience, not to make common religious cause with their sinful ignorance'.³

Intellectual competition

Just as the Pharisees and Sadducees opposed Christ's ministry, the Epicureans and Stoics held competing philosophies but made common cause against Paul. The former group held an evolutionary cosmology for the universe's origin, and therefore thought that the universe would one day dissolve in a cataclysm of collapsing atoms producing a great conflagration. One of their devotees, Lucretius, wrote an epic poem exulting in the fact that there is no coming judgement to fear.⁴ They thought the best life was one devoted to pleasure. It was not hedonism, for that could produce undesirable consequences like illness and economic disruption. Instead, they sought to withdraw from the rough and tumble of life, thereby skating over the difficult side of existence.

GOODING clarifies their view this way, 'Admittedly, Epicureanism made pleasure the chief good to be aimed at in life; but by pleasure it meant a state of trouble-free tranquility. And since the grosser pleasures often involve emotional turbulence, pain, and hangover, Epicureanism advised avoiding such pleasures altogether. The philosophy in fact produced people who within their own fellowships were renowned for their gentle kindness, friendliness, and loyalty. At the same time it bought this tranquil happiness at the cost of deliberately withdrawing from too much involvement in the rough and tumble of life. It was scarcely a philosophy that the ordinary working man, housewife, or businessperson could follow'.⁵

Another writes, 'Epicureans believed that tranquility was achieved through learning about and then practicing that which constitutes a virtuous life: having close friends, avoiding negative people, and having no fear of the distant gods, judgement, or the afterlife. This philosophy was at odds with a biblical worldview that

saw the fear of Yahweh as “the start of wisdom” (Prov 9. 10).⁶ They would scoff at the notion of a God who intervened in world affairs by sending His Son to suffer death on the cross.

Fate and apathy

Their rivals, the Stoics, were pantheists who believed that all was predetermined by the impersonal ‘world-soul’. Cause and effect mindlessly governed the universe, thereby establishing one’s fate. The best of all worlds is the universe as it currently is. All of the forces and events making up our existence are set and cannot be changed. They held no place for individual resurrection or a future heaven. Their doctrine concentrated on this life, not troubling itself about an afterlife. Eastern doctrines like caste and karma offer similar teaching. One historian contrasts it with the gospel, saying, ‘Pride is the basis of Stoic virtue, while humility is the basis of Christian holiness; the former is inspired by egotism, the latter by love to God and man; the Stoic feels no need of a Saviour, and calmly resorts to suicide when the house smokes; while the Christian life begins with a sense of sin, and ends with triumph over death; the resignation of the Stoic is heartless apathy and a surrender to the iron necessity of fate; the resignation of the Christian, is cheerful submission to the will of an all-wise and all-merciful Father in heaven; the Stoic sage resembles a cold, immovable statue, the Christian saint a living body, beating in hearty sympathy with every joy and grief of his fellow-men. At best, Stoicism is

only a philosophy for the few, while Christianity is a religion for all’.⁷

The Judge of all the Earth

At their core, all of these worldviews are man-centred and deny God. Modern thought has not progressed any further on this front – the names change, but the self-absorbed unbelief remains the same. Some espouse materialistic naturalism, deifying the creature rather than the Creator, Rom. 1. 18-25. Others hold to a fatalist view of life: whatever will be, will be, and we must determine our own meaning of life. Still others invent idolatrous conceptions of the Almighty, making manageable gods that approve of their followers and generally place few demands on them. Paul counters all of these errors by preaching God’s revelation through the Lord Jesus and His resurrection, Acts 17. 18.

Using the altar of ‘the unknown god’ as a starting point, the apostle proclaimed the true Maker who is omnipotent, transcendent, and immanent. He is not a distant deity or the universe’s absentee landlord. Nor is He manipulated by man’s idolatrous ministrations. He is not confined to physical temples, and He certainly does not require human charity to survive, vv. 24, 25.

He is both outside of His creation and intimately involved in it. Historically, He laid out national boundaries to place peoples in proximity to the truth, vv. 26, 27. This is further evidenced by the Son of God’s incarnation, sacrificial death, and resurrection. He came

into this world to deliver it from sin and the futility that it generates. He will ultimately deal with the things done by mankind, even to the point of putting down evil and delivering many sons to glory. God’s intervening judgement is fixed for a certain day, and the judge has been appointed, Acts 17. 30, 31; John 5. 24-30. Consequently, God calls on all men everywhere to repent. Christ’s first and second comings demonstrate that the Almighty is neither remote nor impersonal. Rather, He is personally involved in the destruction of evil and the permanent establishment of righteousness’ reign in the universe. The kingdoms of this world shall become ‘the kingdom of our Lord and his Christ’, Rev. 11. 15 ESV.

One clear victor in the marketplace of ideas

People may posit all kinds of false conceptions of reality, but until they believe on the risen and glorified Christ, they remain slaves to sin. The Lord’s redeeming work is the only way to be free and to realize the purpose of human creation. Amid this world’s cacophony of discordant voices, God’s message triumphs over every falsehood. It is rooted in His historical working and will be completed by Christ’s return. His blood-bought people will reign with Him forever, Rev. 5. 10.



Endnotes

- 1 The concept also has its roots in the works of British thinkers as dissimilar as John Milton and John Stuart Mill.
- 2 PETRONIUS, *Life and Epistles*, Vol. 1, pg. 363.
- 3 GREG BAHNSEN, *The Encounter of Jerusalem with Athens*, Ashland Theological Journal Volume 13, 1980, pg. 14.
- 4 De Rerum Natura.
- 5 DAVID GOODING, *True to the Faith: The Acts of the Apostles*, Myrtlefield House, 2013, pg. 346.
- 6 N. T. PARKER, ‘Epicureanism’, *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, Lexham Press, 2016. Another adds, ‘Epicureans argued against fear of death, since in their view death was merely the dissolution of the atoms entangled to make up the human, and they argued against fear of the gods, who enjoyed their own blessedness without concern for human affairs’. PHEME PERKINS, ‘Epicureanism’, *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, HarperCollins, 2011, pg. 252.
- 7 PHILIP SCHAFF, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. 2, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1910, pp. 320, 321.

Economic parables 4

THE PARABLE OF THE GREAT SUPPER

By **KEN TOTTON** Cambridge, England

Dining with Christ

Luke chapter 14 puts a lot of focus on dining. In the ancient world, sharing a meal was not merely to satisfy one's appetite; it was a means of engaging with people socially, signifying acceptance and fellowship. In verse 1, Christ enters a leading Pharisee's home to share a meal, vv. 1, 15. Increasingly in these chapters of Luke's Gospel, Christ is at odds with the Pharisees and rulers who are offended at the inclusiveness of His gospel invitations, appealing especially to the poor and marginalized – those who, in pharisaical thinking, had no place in God's kingdom. Accordingly, verses 7 to 11 constitute a corrective parable for supper guests, as Christ observed their shameless vying for position at the meal. It teaches humility. The trouble with such behaviour is that people tend to adopt the same attitudes of superiority and fancied entitlement when it comes to their relationship with God.

Christ also has corrective advice for His host, vv. 12-14. Among the rich and powerful of religious Israel, table fellowship could be a means to social advancement. Naturally, the poor, sick, and disreputable were excluded from these circles. According to Jesus, God does things very differently, and so should His Jewish hosts, vv. 13, 14.¹

The parable of the great supper is then triggered by the exclamation of a guest about the blessedness of participation in the future kingdom of God, v. 15. The speaker no doubt assumed, as a matter of right, that he would be there.

Banquet and invitations

A wealthy man puts on a **great** banquet and invites **many** guests. Some who receive invitations and initially accept,

refuse to come just as the banquet is about to begin, citing a range of excuses. Not to be thwarted, once and again the master orders a whole new range of disadvantaged people and others to fill the available places.

The parable of verses 16 to 24 addresses the comment of verse 15 in order to identify those who will participate in the kingdom of God. In the Old Testament, the kingdom is often represented by the idea of the messianic banquet, 'In this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all people a feast of choice pieces, a feast of wines on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of well refined wines on the lees', Isa. 25. 6 NKJV.²

Whilst the full enjoyment of this heavenly feast awaits the future, as the context in Isaiah makes clear, now the King and Messiah Himself has come to call Israel's people to participation through the gospel. The prevalence in Luke chapter 14 of the verb 'bidden' or 'bade' ['invited' NKJV] in connection with the banquets is marked: vv. 7, 8 [twice], 9, 10 [twice], 12, 13 ['call'], 16, 17, 24. Elsewhere, the verb is commonly used for calling sinners to salvation through the gospel.³

The banquet conveys to us the scale and costliness of the saving provision that God has made in the gospel of Christ. A banquet certainly satisfies hunger but offers so much more. It is not the work of a moment but requires careful planning and execution. In its future consummation, it will eternally delight every legitimate appetite of those blessed to be there.⁴ How vast the scope and richness of God's redemptive purposes!

According to the customs of the time, the invitation process comprised **two**

stages. The first invitation would go out to the invited guests, much as we might issue notice to reserve a date for a wedding. Food would then be prepared on the basis of people's acceptances; a second call would be issued when the meal was ready.

In relation to Israel, we can see that God had done much to prepare the people for the advent of Christ, both providentially through time and finally with the arrival of John the Baptist, 'saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand', Matt. 3. 2. We should observe that many of the Pharisees and Sadducees came to his baptism, v. 7, corresponding to some who received the personal invitations of our parable. Elsewhere, we learn that the gospel is **to the Jew first**, and also to the Gentile, Rom. 1. 16. Irrespective of the nation's past faithlessness and apostasy, God will be true to His character as a faithful covenant-keeping God.

Excuses

By the time our Lord told this parable, however, many of the Jewish leaders had profound unease at the inclusiveness of the grace of God, Luke 5. 30; 7. 34; 15. 2. Those whose whole approach to religion was based on pedigree, privilege, and meritorious works were grossly offended by the wonderfully wide reach of God's grace to perishing sinners.

Now a servant is sent with the exciting summons, 'Come; for all things are now ready', 14. 17.⁵ This Gospel describes how God's righteous Servant, Jesus, signalled that He had come to fulfil the predictions of Isaiah chapter 61 verses 1 and 2, Luke 4. 18, 19. Sadly, in His own locality of Nazareth the Saviour was greeted with scepticism and violent rejection. Likewise, at this critical point of repeated invitation the parable takes a dark twist. Three invited guests in turn make wholly unconvincing excuses. One needs to see a field that he has purchased and begs to be excused; but in Proverbs the wise woman saw her field and **then** bought it, Prov. 31. 16. Another is on his way to try out some oxen; but surely you would try before you

buy? The third man is blunt, 'I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come'. But why should marriage prevent attendance at a banquet?

The reality is that they simply did not want to be at this supper, possibly because of its terms, or even the nature of the fellow-guests. The refusals reflect the growth of opposition to our Lord and His ministry on the part of the Jewish ruling classes. Moreover, the refusals are insulting, for the invitees had implied commitment by their acceptance of the original invitation, cp. Matt. 3. 7. More generally, we learn that possessions, wealth, and pleasures often militate against people's engagement with God, cp. Luke 8. 14; Jas. 5. 1-6.⁶ Millions today use and abuse the Creator's gifts with no thought for Him or His goodness. In an age of materialism, it is searching to note that none of the pursuits were sinful, and indeed reflected common aspects of life; Satan will ensure that counterfeit gods frequently arise from the **good** things of life.⁷

Unlikely guests

In the face of unbelief and rejection, disappointed servants do well to take the matter to God, cp. Isa. 49. 4. The master is understandably angry, for he has been insulted and his kindness abused. The lavish banquet stands ready, however, so now a new and urgent call is issued to 'the poor, and the maimed, and the halt, and the blind' of the city, Luke 14. 21; cp. v. 13, presumably to their great surprise and delight.



A bias to the poor has often been discerned in Luke's Gospel. Our Lord Himself had nothing against the rich as such, v. 1. Yet the message of His kingdom was especially good news to the poor, outcast, and the conspicuously sinful; they had little to lose, and everything to gain. On the other hand, for the rich and powerful, the gospel was still indeed **true gain**,⁸ but at the same time carried a cost – present loss of power, wealth, and social reputation, 14. 26.

The mission to the needy of the city is duly completed, but 'yet there is room' at the feast.⁹ Now an extended mission is launched beyond the confines of the city to those in the 'highways and hedges'. They are to be 'constrained', v. 23 ESV, not by physical force, but by all legitimate powers of persuasion. We should especially note the **urgency** and **earnestness** of the servant's commission, speaking of the imperative to spread the glorious gospel, Luke 14. 21, 23.

'The city' in Old Testament prophecy often denotes Jerusalem, representing the nation of Israel. Therefore, this outreach **beyond the city** points to the mission to the Gentiles, Acts 13. 46-48. What astonishment to happen upon the riches of a glorious feast made ready, with no entry qualifications whatsoever required (other than repentance and grateful acceptance, in the gospel application)! We might compare the words of Romans chapter 10 verse 20, 'I was found of them that sought me not; I was made manifest unto them that asked not

after me'. The master's intention is that the house should be **filled**.¹⁰ This hints at the marvellous scope and extended duration of God's saving purposes, He 'is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance . . . account that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation', 2 Pet. 3. 9, 15.

Ending on a most solemn and emphatic note, the Judge of all breaks out of parabolic language to address His audience directly, v. 24, 'I say unto you [plural], That none of those men which were bidden shall taste of my supper'. In chapter 13 verses 24 to 30, people missed the banquet **unintentionally**; but not so here. Those originally invited **excused** themselves, and finally were **excluded** by the master of the feast, 14. 24. Others gratefully accepted places which the rejecters might have occupied, 'Seeing ye put it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles', Acts 13. 46; cp. Matt. 21. 43. How solemn! But God will be God, and His grace will secure a full and eternally satisfying house of feasting 'for all peoples'.

Endnotes

- 1 1 Cor. 1. 26-31.
- 2 See also: Isa. 55. 1, 2; 65. 13, 14; Zeph. 1. 7; Matt. 22. 1-14; Luke 6. 21; 12. 37; 13. 29.
- 3 See 1 Cor. 1. 9; 7. 15, 18, 20; Gal. 1. 6, 15; Rev. 19. 9.
- 4 D. W. GOODING, *According to Luke*, IVP, pg. 267.
- 5 Whilst this has a simple function in the story, what thrilling gospel truths are implied! All preparatory ages led up to the coming and work of Christ, Luke 10. 23, 24; 1 Cor. 10. 11; Heb. 9. 26. All that is required of the sinner is to 'come'; 'listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food', Isa. 55. 2 ESV.
- 6 'It is the stock market, family life and house maintenance (among other things) that keep people from the kingdom', D. WENHAM, *The Parables of Jesus*, IVP, pg. 138.
- 7 T. KELLER, *Counterfeit Gods*, Hodder & Stoughton. See Gen. 3. 6.
- 8 1 Tim. 6. 6.
- 9 This indicator of the amazing dimensions of grace contrasts markedly with the 'no room' for the infant Saviour at Bethlehem's inn, Luke 2. 7.
- 10 Rom. 11. 25.

Son of the Father

By **FRANK A. PROUDLOCK** Leicester, England

Many of us will have experienced a father-son relationship first-hand, either as a son, or as a father, or both. For some, parental relationships may have been dysfunctional or missing altogether and the concept may present a challenge. Rather than the Bible borrowing a human picture to help us understand the profound bond between the Lord Jesus Christ and God the Father, we should remember that God was the author of the father-son relationship in the first place at creation. Consequently, some of the simple features of a healthy father-son relationship allow us to understand deep and unfathomable eternal truths. Let us explore four themes relating to the Lord Jesus as the Son of the Father.

Begotten of the Father

When a woman had a son or daughter, the term 'begat' or 'begotten', *gennao*, in the Bible means to give birth. When a man had a child, the term means 'to bring forth'. On a human level, a son comes forth from his father through the union between a man and a woman. For example, in Genesis we read, 'And Adam lived an hundred and thirty years, and begat a son in his own likeness, after his image; and called his name Seth', 5. 3. In this sense, the Lord Jesus was not begotten of Joseph, although Joseph acted as His father with regards to His parental care. In contrast, five times we read of the Lord Jesus as the 'only begotten [*monogenes*], of the Father', or as the 'only begotten Son'. All these are in the writings of John.¹

The term 'only begotten' refers, firstly, to the unique relationship between the Lord Jesus and His Father. The expression is used to describe the relationship between Abraham and Isaac, Heb. 11. 17. Abraham also had sons through Hagar and Keturah, Gen. 16. 15; 25. 2, but Isaac alone was the son of promise who was the focus of Abraham's love, as God said to him, 'Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest', Gen. 22. 2. The Lord Jesus, uniquely, is the One who experiences that deep relationship of love with His Father. 'No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him', John 1. 18.

The term also refers to the Lord Jesus being the same in quality or essence with His Father. Since a father provides approximately fifty percent of the genetic information for his offspring, a father and son share the same nature. A son will usually resemble his father physically and sometimes in respect to his character. The Lord Jesus shares the same nature as His Father as God. This is what the Lord Jesus meant when He said, 'I and my Father are one ["one in essence", *NEWBERRY*]', John 10. 30, and it is why those who heard these words viewed them as blasphemous, v. 31.

It is important to point out that our understanding is limited by time. On earth, a father-son relationship is temporary. It has a beginning and an end. The Lord Jesus has always been the only begotten Son of the Father. In John chapter 1 verse 18, the term, 'the only begotten Son, which is ["which always is", *NEWBERRY*] in the bosom of the Father', indicates that He always has been and always will be the only begotten Son.

Beloved of the Father

The love between a father and his son is one of the strongest forces in any human relationship. The first mention of love in the Bible is the love of a father, Abraham, for his son, Isaac, Gen. 22. 2. Love is an evidence for the Trinity – the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – since 'God is love', 1 John. 4. 8, and love must, by definition, be directed towards another. The term 'beloved Son'

occurs twelve times in the Bible, of which eight references directly describe the Lord Jesus.

Three of the eight references relate to His baptism when there came a voice from heaven, 'This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased', Matt. 3. 17.² Here is the love of the Father for His Son in obscurity. For thirty years, the Lord Jesus had moved outside of the public eye. Much of that time would have been spent working in a carpenter's shop providing for His mother, brothers and sisters. It reminds us that God takes pleasure in a life quietly lived out before Him, in our workplace or place of education, or serving God in a local church yet operating outside of a public sphere.

In the parable of the wicked vinedressers, a final attempt by the lord of the vineyard is made to reach out to the unrepentant husbandmen as he seeks fruit from his vineyard. He reasons, 'What shall I do? I will send my beloved son: it may be they will reverence him when they see him', Luke 20. 13. This depicts the love of the Father for His Son in adversity. The parable reminds us of the pleasure the Father took in His Son as He sent Him into a world of opposition and hatred, ultimately with the Lord Jesus becoming 'obedient unto death, even the death of the cross', Phil. 2. 8.

The four remaining references relate to the events on the Mount of Transfiguration when a bright cloud overshadowed the mountain and a voice came out of the cloud declaring, 'This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him', Matt. 17. 5.³ Peter tells us that these events were a preview of the return and reign of the Lord Jesus in glory, 2 Pet. 1. 16-18. Here is the love of the Father for His Son in supremacy. The Lord Jesus has been tested in every domain of life, in obscurity and popularity, under scrutiny and in rejection. In a future day, He will rule over all the earth and will succeed in a sphere where even the greatest men, such as David, Solomon, Asa, and Hezekiah, have all failed.

Image of the Father

Children copy the words and actions of their parents. This puts

a great responsibility on Christian parents who need the prayers and support of God's people. The Lord Jesus uses this picture to illustrate the way He acted in complete unison in mind and action with His Father. It is part of a wider theme explored in John's Gospel – the relationship between the Lord Jesus and His Father. The Lord Jesus uses the term 'My Father' thirty-three times in John's Gospel alone. Examples include:

- His work: 'My Father worketh hitherto, and I work', 5. 17.
- His teaching: 'As my Father hath taught me, I speak these things', 8. 28; 'I speak that which I have seen with my Father', 8. 38.
- His love: 'If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love', 15. 10.

- His commission: 'As my Father hath sent me, even so send I you', 20. 21.

Heir of the Father

In Hebrews chapter 1 verse 2, the Lord Jesus is described as having been 'appointed heir of all things'. The idea of the Lord Jesus as the Heir is closely associated with His title as Firstborn. In Bible times, the firstborn son was not just the first in time, but also first in rank and honour as the leader of the family and the one who carried the family name. The firstborn also received the birthright, a double portion of the inheritance, for example, Joseph received a double portion of the land through his sons, Ephraim and Manasseh.⁴ In some cases, like Isaac, all of the inheritance passed to one son, Gen. 25. 5. But what is the Lord Jesus heir over? What are the 'all things' referred to, Heb. 1. 2?

In Colossians chapter 1, the Lord Jesus is described as Firstborn in two spheres:

- He is Firstborn of every creature, v. 15. This term is explained fully in verses 16 and 17 where we read of the Lord Jesus as the Creator of the physical universe and invisible angelic realm. It was created by Him and for Him. He is the originator of it. He is Lord over it, and it all rightfully belongs to Him.
- He is Firstborn from the dead, v. 18. This is explained in verses 18 to 23 where we read that He is 'head of the body, the church', v. 18. As Lord over a new creation, the world redeemed from sin through His work on the cross, He was the first to go into death and rise from the dead to die no more. Since we belong to Him, He is the guarantee that we will follow Him into resurrection and eternal life. Thus, He is the 'firstborn among many brethren', Rom. 8. 29. He is Lord over this new realm, 'For to this end Christ both died, and rose, and revived, that he might be Lord both of the dead and living', 14. 9. Since He paid the redemption price, He claims ownership over it also.

Since the Lord Jesus takes first place in every sphere, Paul makes the concise yet sublime conclusion in Colossians chapter 1 verse 18, 'that in all things he might have the preeminence'. What are the implications for us? Does He take the preeminent place in every sphere of our lives? Do we acknowledge that we have been 'bought with a price' and that we belong to Him as part of His great inheritance? 'Therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's', 1 Cor. 6. 20.

Endnotes

- 1 John 1. 14, 18; 3. 16, 18; 1 John 4. 9.
- 2 The other two references are: Mark 1. 11 and Luke 3. 22.
- 3 The other three references are: Mark 9. 7; Luke 9. 35; 2 Pet. 1. 17.
- 4 Reuben forfeited the firstborn rights because of his immorality, along with Simeon and Levi because of their violent disposition, Gen. 49. 4, 5. 1 Chronicles chapter 5 verses 1 and 2 tell us that the birthright with respect to the land of Israel passed to Joseph, whereas the birthright concerning leadership passed to Judah.



THE TEACHING IN THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS

Part 1 – Introduction (2)

By **BRIAN CLATWORTHY** Newbury, England

The doctrinal argument of Hebrews

The writer presents his basic doctrinal argument in the first two chapters of the letter, but at the same time provides us with several themes that will be developed by him later. He starts his letter by reflecting upon how God had previously communicated to His people in various ways through the prophets, 1. 1-3. We should notice how the prophets are almost dismissed in one single verse whereas the revelation of the Son takes up the whole of the rest of the letter. The question then arises as to why the Son is so fitted to be the final and definitive message of God?¹ The answer is simply because He is uniquely the Son of God, the heir of all things, the agent of creation, the very effulgence of God's glory, the exact representation of God, and the One who purifies us from sin.

His subsequent enthronement on the right hand of God marks Him out as superior to the angels, and this superiority is then explored in chapter 1 verse 4 into chapter 2 verse 18.² The writer uses a series of texts from the Old Testament in support of his argument that the Son being the final message of God must be greater than angelic mediation. It is during this lengthy and detailed argument that the writer includes the first of several warnings to the Hebrews, 2. 1-4.

Two new themes are introduced in chapter 2 that will be further developed later in the letter, but flow out of the first chapter, namely sovereignty and priesthood. Although man was given complete sovereignty over the earth, what the writer emphasizes is the seeming

disparity between the sovereignty that God intended for man and the reality on the ground. Ultimately, this sovereignty will be realized through the true Son of Man who the writer now names as 'Jesus', 2. 9.³ His manhood also fits Him perfectly for His role as a High Priest, and this now becomes one of the dominant themes of the letter.⁴ Without the letter to the Hebrews, we would have little, if any, understanding of the high priesthood of Christ.

The heroes of the Jewish Commonwealth are introduced to us in chapters 3 to 7. They are all shown, in their differing ways, to be inferior to the Apostle and High Priest whom Christians acknowledge and hold allegiance to, namely Jesus.⁵ The faithfulness of Christ is then compared with that of Moses in chapter 3. Moses led the people of God, but through unbelief many failed to enter the Promised Land. Belief in Christ will mean that God's people, His household, will continue to the end, provided they stand fast in their allegiance to Him, 3. 6. It is at this point of the argument that the second warning is pronounced by the writer, 3. 7 – 4. 13.

The writer quickly moves on from establishing the superiority of the high priesthood of Christ, and, in chapter 8 verse 1 to chapter 9 verse 28, he argues that His ministry is not linked to earthly sacrifices and an earthly tabernacle. The superiority of Christ's sacrifice and present ministry is highlighted by the fact that the old covenant introduced by Moses had been ratified by animal blood, and was simply a copy of the heavenly reality. If the old covenant had been effective there would have been no need for a new one. The

death of Christ has ratified the new covenant, which is superior to the old one.

Chapter 10 verses 1 to 18 are, to some extent, a summary of the previous two chapters, but also explain the fundamental difference between the temporary nature of the Levitical offerings and the finality of the sacrifice of Christ. The practical implications of Christ's sacrifice and priesthood are then given in chapter 10 verses 19 to 25. The freedom of access that the believer has into the presence of God is contrasted with the prescriptive regulations of Judaism that prevented such access. Believers are therefore invited to approach God boldly, and, additionally, encourage and strengthen one another in the faith.

Chapter 11 of this letter is probably one of the most famous passages in the whole of the Bible. It brings together a great number of named and unnamed individuals who, despite their failings, exhibited the meaning of faith in their lives. The perfecting of and the fulfilment of the promises made to these Old Testament heroes of faith was only possible with the advent of Christ, 1. 2, and with those who belonged to Him, 11. 39, 40. The challenge then to the Hebrews was if they lived in the age where God's promises were being realized in Christ, how much greater should their faith have been?

The opening word 'Therefore' in chapter 12 indicates a clear link with the preceding chapter. It is often suggested that the 'cloud of witnesses' in verse 1 are simply spectators in an arena watching and urging on their successors to complete their race of faith. Such an interpretation seems to miss the point though, because it is not so much that they look to encourage us, but, rather, that we look to them for inspiration and encouragement. From verses 4 to 13, another aspect of faith is explained, relating to the question of why God disciplines His children. The Hebrews experience of hardship was not an end *per se*, but a means to an end that God employed to discipline His children and prove that they were legitimate. Discipline

may be unpleasant at the time, but, long term, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace, v. 11. With a final exhortation taken from two Old Testament texts, Prov. 4. 26; Isa. 35. 3, 4, the writer again defers to the metaphor of the athlete and encourages his readers to get back into shape so that they can continue in the race set before them, vv. 11-13. The fifth and last warning in the letter comes in the remainder of this chapter, vv. 14-29. This admonition is a warning to the Hebrews to avoid immorality and not to reject God, as seen in the life of Esau, vv. 16, 17. This warning will be dealt with again in more detail in a later article.

Chapter 13 of this letter contains several concluding exhortations, a prayer request, a doxology, a news

update, and a closing farewell. While some scholars have argued that this chapter is an appendix, or a later supplement to the letter, in our view O'BRIEN is right when he states, 'But Hebrews 13 is "far from an afterthought". Its essential message cannot be separated from the concerns and themes of the first twelve chapters'.⁶ The doxology in verse 20 reminds the readers that it is through the eternal covenant, ratified by the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus, that God is enabled to equip them to do His will and bring pleasure to Him. In his news update, the writer refers to the release of a certain individual named Timothy, v. 23. This may be the Apostle Paul's companion, although there is no real way of knowing this to be the case,

and, in any event, it is not a strong indication of Pauline authorship.

The closing benediction in verse 25 includes the word 'grace', which is somewhat of a loaded term in respect of the argument of this letter. Even though the Greek word for 'grace' only occurs seven times⁷ in this letter, on each occasion it is used to encourage the Hebrews to persist in their faith. It would therefore have been extremely disappointing to the writer if the Hebrews had rejected the grace of God in favour of Judaism again, a system of works righteousness. His desire for them was that they might go on to maturity, with the wonderful example of Christ set before them. This is the ongoing challenge of this New Testament letter for us as well.



Endnotes

- 1 Notice that the actual name of the Son ('Jesus') is not disclosed until chapter 2 verse 9.
- 2 The idea of being seated at God's right hand is an indication not only of a finished work but also the enthronement of Christ, Ps. 110. 1. ANDREW LINCOLN suggests that Psalm 110 verses 1 and 4 contain the major theme of Hebrews – the exaltation of Christ at God's right hand, v. 1, and specifically His exaltation as Priest after the order of Melchizedek according to God's oath, v. 4. (*Hebrews – A Guide*, Bloomsbury, pg. 69.)
- 3 The title 'son of man' in Psalm 8 was not interpreted by Jewish scholars as Messianic. It is, however, the Messianic interpretation of this title by the writer to the Hebrews that completely changes the approach to Psalm 8.
- 4 2. 17, 18; 3. 1; 4. 14-16; 5. 1-10; 6. 20; 7. 1-28; 8. 1-4; 9. 11-14, 24, 26; 10. 11, 12, 21; 13. 15. This represents just under a quarter of the entire letter.
- 5 The word 'apostle' is used of Christ being the representative of God sent out to be the final message to man, Heb. 3. 1. This is alluded to in chapter 2 verse 12 where the writer cites from Psalm 22 verse 22 and earlier as the pioneer of salvation, Heb. 2. 10. These themes are then further developed in chapters 3 and 4 in relationship to Moses and Joshua. As High Priest, He represents His people before the throne of God, and the writer provides two ways in which this representation is superior by comparison with the Aaronic priesthood in chapters 5 and 7.
- 6 PETER O'BRIEN, *The Letter to the Hebrews* (Pillar New Testament Commentary), Apollos, 2010, pg. 502.
- 7 See 2. 9; 4. 16; 10. 29; 12. 15, 28; 13. 9, 25.

Gospel billboards

By **CLIVE BARBER** Cooroy, Australia

The present work of erecting gospel billboards throughout the main city centres and highways of Australia commenced in 1995 under the initiation of our esteemed brother and evangelist, John McDowell. For almost two decades following, our late brother, along with his wife Olive, committed themselves to this effective avenue of presenting gospel verses to the public, with a slogan instructing people to read the Bible. This was just one of many ways in which our brother sought to spread the message of the gospel to a needy world. In their booklet, *God Answers Prayer*, John and Olive recall many fascinating stories of their work, and its reading will surely stimulate any Christian! John suffered from a lifelong illness of lung complications and by 2014 he was too ill to continue the responsibility of erecting the signs, so, rather than see it cease, Rachael and I sought to continue this work with the help of God.

As in most countries of the world, here in Australia there are various advertising companies who rent space from private or government land sites for the purpose of marketing. Each month these companies seek corporations or individuals to use their advertising spaces for a prescribed fee. In our instance, we liaise with one particular company with whom John built a trusted relationship. Each month they send us an email with a spreadsheet containing available sites that are left over after the multi-national companies and large corporations have had their pick. It means that these sites come to us at a slightly cheaper rate, but, invariably,

there are a number of excellent locations on the list to choose from! Once the list has been emailed to us, we go State by State using postcodes to determine the rating of its location. Early in the process, one of the things we did was to sight and document the location and exposure of every sign, creating a catalogue with each billboard categorized, so it was easier to determine the quality of the location. In selecting a good location for each billboard, some practical points we consider are:

- Is the height of the sign a good distance from the ground, to prevent graffiti and vandalism?
- Does the sign have lights, to enable maximum exposure over a twenty-four-hour period?
- When viewing the sign from a distance, are there trees, bushes, buildings or any other obstructions in the line of sight?
- How many people will drive/walk/pass by that way?
- What gospel verse we might wisely choose to make sure it can be clearly read in the few seconds of passing by.
- Contact details are essential. We have a webpage advertised (www.read-your-bible.net) which, when sought, folk not only find information concerning the signs, but are led to a larger gospel website run by Bryan Stewart (an evangelist from South Australia). We also display my mobile phone number for any member of the public to make contact. Yes, we receive the frequent abusive texts and phone calls, but it's worth it when we consider the many



profitable conversations we've had over the years.

We then email the company the spreadsheet of selected locations, who in turn send us a contract, providing no one else got in first, which we sign and return. Following this, we have to select which gospel verse we want in each particular location. We have around twenty vinyl signs which we use. These are stored in a facility managed by the advertising company who take full responsibility for the warehousing of these signs whilst not in use. There are two main fees attached to the erecting of each sign:

- (1) The fee of transportation and installation.
- (2) The cost of renting the space for the duration of one month. In the subsequent period, we select a different location, because, if no one else rents the space where our sign is, it remains there. Often, the Lord grants us 'free' months of advertising as a result. One such sign was known to remain for many months, the Lord using it for blessing.

In every stage of the process, we pray, dependent upon God to place a specific verse, in the appropriate place, for the right people/person.

John created the slogan 'Read Your Bible' in bold red letters on every sign, so we decided to keep this as we felt it was something that identified these billboards as being from the same source. Primarily, it instructs the people to go to the word of God for themselves and, as a result, there have been many requests for a Bible, which we post out free of charge. There are many stories we could relay.

On one occasion we received a phone call from a man who had left his home one Sunday morning to commit suicide. Having taken the necessary aids, he proceeded to drive his car through the city of Melbourne to the



destination. Stopping at a set of traffic lights he looked up to be confronted by these words, 'For by grace are you saved through faith . . . it is the gift of God'. Stunned, he began to weep in his car, before returning home and obtaining a Bible. Through the power of the word of God this man was saved, and we will rejoice together in heaven.

In another area, we displayed a sign stating, 'The blood of Jesus Christ God's Son cleanses us from all sin'. Unbeknown to us, it was in an area heavily populated by followers of the religion of Islam. We had a huge volume of calls and text messages, some aggressively telling us that God doesn't have a Son, and others asking questions about the verse! One of them, a Muslim gentleman, phoned multiple times, each time with a different question – Blood? Jesus Christ? God's Son? Cleanses from sin? I wonder if we will meet him in glory?

In Sydney, a Christian woman phoned to say how much she was thrilled to see the gospel verses, and asked if we could print the same to be placed permanently on the front of her house for all to see. A quick street view of her house revealed that the garage door would be the best place, so we organized this to become a reality.

On another occasion, a wild storm passed through the city of Perth, Western Australia, damaging buildings, but leaving a gospel sign untouched. We had numerous calls because of this particular board and even international news stations showed it – see the pictures accompanying this article



We have been instructed to sow the seed of the word of God! Let us be liberal in its distribution, sowing with confidence that our God is able to bring a return beyond our ability or imagination. In the sowing of precious seed, there must be planning, preparation, purpose and persistence, and in it all there is pleasure in what the seed produces – the eternal prize is more than worth it! Heaven will be full of wonderful surprises when we see what the Lord has done! Let each one of us ask ourselves, what are we doing to help sow the seed of God's word? Would I be willing to decorate my garage door with the word of God, so those passing by can be blessed? It would be a strange thing to find a farmer who kept his seed locked up in a barn, unwilling to part with it, or refusing to sow over the worry of possible conditions that might hinder its fruit. No! The farmer not only plans ahead, but prepares for the activity, purposes to sow and persists in difficult conditions, knowing that by parting with the seed, he will gain more in the end! No wonder our Lord in His famous parable of the sower, exhorted the multitudes to: 'Hearken;

Behold, there went out [planning] a sower to sow: [preparation] and it came to pass, as he sowed, [purpose] some fell by the way side . . . some fell on stony ground . . . some fell among thorns [persistence] . . . other fell on good ground, and did yield fruit [produce] that sprang up and increased; [pleasure] and brought forth, some thirty, and some sixty, and some an hundred [prize]. And he said unto them, He that hath ears to hear, let him hear', Mark 4. 3-9.

Whilst in this short article we have been asked to give a report on the current work of erecting gospel billboards in the public domain throughout the land of Australia, our prayer is that it will stimulate Christians and assemblies in committing themselves elsewhere to the public display and distribution of the scriptures.

'In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thine hand: for thou knowest not whether shall prosper, either this or that, or whether they both shall be alike good', Eccles. 11. 6.



SAFETY IN TROUBLED TIMES

By **KEITH R. KEYSER** Gilbertsville, Pennsylvania, USA

Psalms 46, 47, and 48 depict the progressively glorious pathway of the Lord Jesus Christ to defend His city and sit on David's throne. In doing so, they inspire confidence in the incomparable security that God's people of every dispensation enjoy. Psalm 46 particularly presents the Almighty as our all-powerful defence in the face of surrounding calamities. It was a particular favourite of LUTHER, who based his great hymn 'A Mighty Fortress Is Our God' on it. As he explained, 'We sing this Psalm to the praise of God, because God is with us, and powerfully and miraculously preserves and defends His church and His word, against all fanatical spirits, against the gates of hell, against the implacable hatred of the devil, and against all the assaults of the world, the flesh and sin'.¹ It was also encouraging to the British General Sir William Dobbie during the harrowing Second World War siege of Malta.² Believers of any time-period find solace in this comforting song.

Its structure and context

The psalm breaks down into three stanzas, each concluded by 'Selah', the Hebrew musical term for pausing for consideration. Morgan outlines it thus:

'vv. 1-3, Nothing to fear. God is with us.

The challenge of confidence.

vv. 4-7, The Lord enthroned in Jerusalem.

The secret of confidence.

vv. 8-11, Peace on earth and worldwide dominion.

The vindication of confidence'.³

My outline is:

- I. The Lord's unfailing help, vv. 1-3;
- II. The Lord's holy and refreshing presence, vv. 4-7;
- III. The Lord's awesome works, vv. 8-11.

The psalm was obviously composed at a time of national distress. The reference to 'the sea[s]' in verse 2 probably indicates Gentile threats, such as occurred when Sennacherib came against Jerusalem in 701 BC during King Hezekiah's reign. There are also verbal and conceptual commonalities between Isaiah chapters 8 and 33 and this psalm, likely alluding to the Assyrian threat. Whatever the occasion, it

demonstrates that temporal and eternal security is God-centred. The psalm is filled with divine titles and pronouns that refer to our Redeemer.

'God' – *Elohim* – occurs seven times – twice as the 'God of Jacob'.

'Lord' – YHWH/*Jehovah* – occurs once.

'Lord of hosts' – occurs twice.

'Most High' – *Elyon* – occurs once.

'I/he/him/who' referring to God – occurs seven times.

The superscription identifies it as one of the eleven psalms that are addressed to the sons of Korah, people whose personal history would particularly incline them to revel in

the Lord's protecting mercies, Num. 16. It is also said to be 'For Alamothe' NKJV, a derivative of the Hebrew word for women, and is thought to be a musical term for soprano voices. Women, like Miriam and Mary, could rejoice in divine redemption and praise the Lord for His redemption, Exod. 15. 20, 21; Luke 1. 46-55. As a contemporary author observes, 'This is the language of faith. It is faith's assertion in a time of trouble when the foundations of life seem to be collapsing all around. When we feel fear, when the securities of life are in danger, when we face trouble in the shape of potential persecution then let us do what the psalmist does, let us assert that God is our refuge and strength. Let us trust in Him . . . The name of the Lord is a strong tower. The righteous run into it and are safe, Ps. 18. 10. As the disciples did, let us ask the Lord to increase our faith, Luke 17. 4'.⁴

In God we trust

The opening verse identifies God as 'our refuge and strength'.⁵ KELLY remarks, 'This is the calm but joyful answer to the taunts of all their foes without who asked, Where is thy God? Their refuge and strength, their refuge in distress very readily found, God is owned Most High and Jehovah of hosts, the God of Jacob, but God as He is in His own nature exalted among the nations and in the earth as He will be'.⁶ Faced with external threats and internal fears, Israel is exhorted to remember His work of salvation and security. That He is 'a very present help in [times of] trouble' reminds one that He is never late and is always with His



people, Heb. 13. 5, 6. The psalmist concludes, 'Therefore we will not fear' NKJV in the midst of seeming chaos and cataclysm. Theology must lead one to daily trust in the Almighty's unassailable protection, whatever one's circumstances.⁷

Men think that mountains are solid, yet they may shake under seismic activity. Israel might tremble in the face of its foes, but the Lord is the great mover of mountains, Matt. 21. 21, who also has an unshakeable kingdom, Heb. 12. 18-29.⁸ The Bible often uses the seas to depict the tumultuous Gentile nations, Isa. 17. 12, 13. Like their physical counterpart, the Almighty sets a limit on the nations' progress, Ps. 104. 9; Dan. 4. 31, 32; 5. 28. Many nations have tried – and will try during the future tribulation – to destroy Israel; nevertheless, God will preserve her from all her enemies; nor shall 'the gates of hell' prevail against His church, Matt. 16. 18.

Peace like a river

In contrast to the raging sea waves, there is a river – a well-ordered water course bounded by shores – 'whose streams shall make glad the city of God', Ps. 46. 4 NKJV. It reminds one of the peaceful flowing rivers of Shiloah, Isa. 8. 6, and the renewing river from the millennial temple, Ezek. 47. 1-12. Spiritual refreshment proceeds from God's dwelling place, called here 'the holy place of the tabernacles of the most High', Ps. 46. 4; cp. Rev. 22. 1, 2. This fallen world is full of 'change and decay', but the Lord offers peace and confidence.⁹

His people are safe because He is in their midst. At the breaking of the dawn – immediately after the dark night – He brings forth deliverance, v. 5. The nations will be moved, but God's people remain steadfast. Verses 7 and 11 further assure them of His perpetual presence. He is 'Lord of hosts' declaring His omnipotence and capacity to help when His people are weak.¹⁰ He is also 'the God of Jacob' – not 'Israel', meaning a prince with God – but the historic name that refers to His infamous past as a trickster.¹¹ The Saviour rescues man because of grace, not because of human merit.

Even at our weakest, He is the faithful fortress of His people.

The Prince of Peace at work

The last stanza shows the Lord as the coming conqueror, who will pacify the earth by vanquishing His impenitent foes. Verse 8 invites the reader to 'behold the works of the Lord'. He who worked in creation and redemption, now displays His future work of judgement. At His second coming to earth, the Lord Jesus will destroy the weapons of the rebellious nations and forcibly cause wars to cease, v. 9. Prophetic schemes that envision the world getting progressively better and better are both naïve and unbiblical. This psalm shows that the Lord's longsuffering will end, and He will establish His rule by force over unbelievers, Rev. 19. As Bellett says, '*righteousness* will link itself with *power*, and then evil will be judged; and afterwards the whole earth will be governed in peace. Righteousness will take the *sword* first, and then the *sceptre*'.¹²

To Christians, 'Be still, and know that I am God' conjures up thoughts of confident rest and trust in the Lord.¹³ Yet this word translated 'be still' has the thought of ceasing from rebellion and opposition. The *New English Translation* renders it, "Stop your striving and recognize that I am God".¹⁴ It is a call for sinners to lay down their arms and surrender to God before the day of salvation expires. The human depredations that are described in vivid detail in the psalm's first three verses will end, and divine righteousness will prevail. As someone wrote, 'When Israel trusts in the Lord and enjoys deliverance in that day, she will be able to employ the words of Psalm 46 as never before'.¹⁵ Similarly, believers in the church age will rejoice in the accomplishment of full salvation through God, our refuge and strength. The psalm concludes with the confident declaration that we must keep in mind daily, 'The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge'.

Endnotes

- 1 MARTIN LUTHER, in C. H. SPURGEON, *The Treasury of David*, Vol. 2, Marshall, n.d., pg. 344.
- 2 See LT. GENERAL SIR WILLIAM DOBBIE, '*The Bible A Book For Today*', reprinted in Precious Seed 4. 8, 1952; accessed here: <https://www.preciousseed.org/articles/the-bible-a-book-for-today/>.
- 3 G. C. MORGAN, in WILLIAM MACDONALD, *Believer's Bible Commentary*, Thomas Nelson, 1995, pg. 621 [Italics original].
- 4 JOHN THOMSON, '*Preparing For Persecution*', 28/7/20, on the blog, Cave Adullam; accessed here: <https://johngreenview.wordpress.com/2020/07/28/preparing-for-persecution/>.
- 5 An alternate rendering: 'ELOHIM is unto us a refuge and safe retreat, as a help in distresses He is thoroughly proved'. FRANZ DELITZSCH, in KEIL and DELITZSCH, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, Vol. 5, Hendrickson, 1996, pg. 336.
- 6 WILLIAM KELLY, *Notes on Psalms*, Weston, 1904, pg. 200.
- 7 'Confessing what we should believe is easy; bringing our hearts to feel that confessed security is monumental', R. L. HUBBARD, JR. and R. K. JOHNSTON, *Psalms*, Baker, 2012, pg. 209.
- 8 'Alps and Andes may tremble, but faith rests on a firmer basis, and is not to be moved by swelling seas. Evil may ferment, wrath may boil, and pride may foam, but the brave heart of holy confidence trembles not. Great men who are like mountains may quake for fear in times of great calamity, but the man whose trust is in God needs never be dismayed'. C. H. SPURGEON, *The Treasury of David*, Vol. 2, Marshall, n.d., pg. 340.
- 9 HENRY's comment is appropriate: 'The spiritual comforts which are conveyed to the saints by soft and silent whispers, and which come not with observation, are sufficient to counterbalance the most loud and noisy threatenings of an angry and malicious world', MATTHEW HENRY, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Hendrickson, 1994, pg. 809.
- 10 For example, the name first occurs in 1 Samuel chapter 1, a time of great spiritual declension in Israel. It is also prominent in the post-exilic prophets, who were ministering to a weakened remnant of the people. Those three books account for 37% of Old Testament appearances. It occurs fourteen times in Haggai, fifty-three times in Zechariah, and twenty-four times in Malachi.
- 11 Jacob means 'supplanter'; see Gen. 27. 35, 36.
- 12 J. G. BELLETT, *Short Meditations on the Psalms*, Broom, 1876, pg. 52 [Italics original].
- 13 Of course, the Lord Jesus did promise: 'Come to me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls', Matt. 11. 28, 29 NKJV. Salvation rest flows from faith in Him.
- 14 More recently, the Christian Standard Bible translates it 'Stop fighting, and know that I am God'.
- 15 ANON., '*Hope Of His People*', 19/5/22, in Precious Seed; accessed here: https://www.preciousseed.org/daily_thought/hope-of-his-people/.

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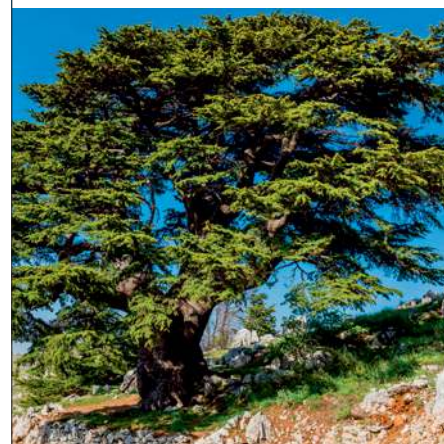
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'And Hiram king of Tyre sent messengers to David, and cedar trees, and carpenters, and masons', 2 Sam. 5. 11.

PS
Magazine

'And Hiram king of Tyre sent messengers to David, and cedar trees, and carpenters, and masons', 2 Sam. 5. 11

The move of David's headquarters from Hebron to Jerusalem may have been strategic but there is also the prophetic significance that Zion occupies in relation to the Messiah and His kingdom. As a city, Jerusalem bridges the two royal tribes of Benjamin (Saul) and Judah (David) and the move to this city was a way of uniting the nation. Equally, as the Jebusites had made it a seemingly impregnable fortress, David would also have a formidable base.

The news of David's victory at Jerusalem and his taking of the fortress of Zion brought him recognition, for 'Hiram king of Tyre sent messengers to David', v. 11. This might be seen as an attempt by Hiram to establish a peace accord with the new king of Israel; we are told that the reason for this seeming generosity was that 'the Lord had established him [David] king over Israel, and that he had exalted his kingdom for his people Israel's sake', v. 12.

The cedar tree has a significant place in the Old Testament. It is renowned for its height, Isa. 37. 24, its thick boughs, which form 'a shadowing shroud', Ezek. 31. 3, and its glory, Isa. 35. 2. It is described as 'the glory of Lebanon', 60. 13, surpassing the other trees of that land, and this meant that its wood was highly prized. Thus, it is appropriate that David's house should contain the materials befitting his status and conquests as king of Israel. It may also be symbolic, as Hiram transfers that which indicated the glory of Lebanon to Israel and their king. But Hiram was also being prepared for a work that would be brought to fruition later – the building of another house, Solomon's Temple. The wood from the cedar, close grained and full of resin to preserve it from rot and worm, would be used extensively in this building of surpassing glory.

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