



Light

...on a New World

*Published for the
Bexley Christadelphian Ecclesia (Dawn Fellowship) by*



*Light Bible Publications,
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Bexley, Kent
DA5 1UB, England*

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VOLUME TWENTY NUMBER TWO

CONTENTS

Editorial	Page 1
Parables of Jesus	Page 3
Does it matter what you believe?	Page 11
Bible teaching about...	Page 19
Birds of the Bible	Page 26

Cover picture: The Peacock (see page 26)



Editorial

THE TOTAL ECLIPSE of the Moon that I saw on the evening of 3rd March 2007 (GMT), was also visible in many parts of the world including Europe, Africa and parts of the Americas, Australia and Asia.

A lunar eclipse occurs when part of the earth's shadow falls on the surface of the moon. For this to happen, the Sun, Earth and Moon must all be in a line. When that happens, the Moon passes through the umbra region of the Earth – and a dark shadow of the Earth's disc is seen moving over the bright disc of the Moon. During a total eclipse, the Moon passes through the earth's umbra region but does not become completely dark. Some sunlight still reaches the moon and gives it a deep reddish brown colour during the maximum part of the total Eclipse (see diagram and picture on page 2).

The Bible contains a number of references to the Moon not giving her light, which are associated with the overthrow of nations (See for example Isaiah chapter 13 verse 10 concerning Babylon and Ezekiel chapter 32 verse 7 concerning Egypt). There is a startling prediction by the prophet Joel concerning events still future: *'And I will show wonders in the heavens and in the earth: Blood and fire and pillars of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness **and the moon into blood**, before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD'* [Joel 2.30,31].

The coming day of the Lord is the main theme of Joel's prophecy. Like so many of the prophets of Israel, he predicted a time when God will intervene in world affairs – suddenly and dramatically. It will take

most people by surprise and will be accompanied by great signs and judgements on the world of the ungodly.



Lunar Eclipse on 3rd March 2007 (GMT)

Jesus also made predictions about the time immediately prior to his Second Coming. He said: ***‘there will be signs in the sun, in the moon, and in the stars; and on the earth distress of nations, with perplexity... men’s hearts failing them for fear and the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth...’*** [Luke 21.25.26].

Sometimes the Bible uses the heavenly bodies to represent ruling powers (see article on this subject in volume 16.9) but God has also used them in a literal sense to demonstrate His Almighty power. The book of Joshua for example records how the sun and moon *‘stood still’* during a crucial battle resulting in the defeat of the Amorite kings by Israel under Joshua’s leadership.

The important thing to remember is that God will again demonstrate His great power when Jesus returns to overthrow the kindoms of this world and set up the kingdom of God on earth. Jesus said to his followers: *‘when you see these things happening, know that the kingdom of God is near’* [Luke 21.31]. The prophet Joel tells us in that passage quoted above that *‘whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved’* [Joel 2.32]. Will you be among that number?

Editor

Parables of Jesus...

the Pharisee and the Tax Collector

THIS PARABLE IS found in Luke chapter 18 where Jesus portrays the characters of two men who went up to the temple to pray.



At the start Jesus issues a strong warning *‘to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others’* [Luke 18.9]. The parable contrasts the smug, self righteous Pharisee with the humble, contrite tax collector. Jesus concluded, *‘I tell you, this man (the tax collector) went down to his house justified rather than the other; for every one who exalts himself will be abased, and he who humbles himself will be exalted’* [Luke 18.14].

As sinners both men needed forgiveness, but the mind set of the Pharisee, blind to his own faults and disdainful of the failings of others, was a barrier to acceptable worship. Put bluntly, *‘If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he*

is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness’ [1 John 1.8, 9].

THE PHARISEE

There were about six thousand members of this pious religious sect in Israel when Jesus told the parable as a warning to those of his disciples with pharisaic tendencies. The Hebrew word for Pharisee means ‘*separate*’ and that is how the Pharisees lived. Confined to special villages or areas of towns, they went out of their way to maintain strict separation from those outside their exclusive communities, whom they dismissively described as ‘*people of the land*’ or ‘*sinners*’.

When Jesus condemned the Scribes and Pharisees for their arrogance and self importance he exposed their real motives: ‘*But all their works they do to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments. They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, greetings in the market places, and to be called by men, Rabbi, Rabbi*’ [Matthew 23.5-7].

True to form, the parable described how ‘*the Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself*’ [Luke 18.11 NIV]. With his distinctive dress and confident manner the Pharisee made sure that other worshippers were able to hear his very public prayer. He was on an ego trip. It can be no accident that his prayer, which gave examples of moral superiority over other men, including the tax collector present in the temple, was spoken in the first person singular. ‘*God, I thank you that I am not like other men – extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I possess*’ [Luke 18. 11, 12].

‘GOD, I THANK YOU ...’

This was the reverse of a prayer of thanks to God, because the Pharisee was really asking God to thank him for his exemplary life! Such perverseness arose because this complacent Pharisee thought that he could somehow gain God’s favour by parading his own goodness.

With an inflated opinion of himself, he looked down with contempt on others considered to be less devout than him, especially the tax collector who worked for the Romans.

God hates self righteousness as we read in Isaiah: *'I was sought by those who did not ask for me; I was found by those who did not seek me ...Who say, 'Keep to yourself, do not come near me, for I am holier than you!'* These are smoke in my nostrils, a fire that burns all the day' [Isaiah 65.1, 5].

Like an actor, the Pharisee was using the temple as a stage. His soliloquy was meant to impress the audience with his many supposed virtues but his prayer, full of self-congratulation and a high opinion of his own righteousness, did not get beyond the temple ceiling and rebounded on his own head. Job tells us why: *'If I justify myself, mine own mouth shall condemn me: if I say I am perfect, it shall also prove me perverse'* [Job 9.20 KJV].

The Pharisee was so absorbed by the play that he failed to appreciate his plight. If the props - the broad phylacteries and distinctive clothes were removed then underneath was a sinner like everybody else, totally dependent on God's mercy. In reality *'we are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags; we all fade as a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away'* [Isaiah 64.6].

THE TAX COLLECTOR

'And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!'

[Luke 18.13].

Whereas the Pharisee had sought prominence inside the temple, the tax collector had not come to make an impression on others. Standing afar off he shunned the crowds, preferring to be unobserved as alone

he concentrated on what he was doing. In this very private moment between himself and his Maker, he thought of no one else, the other worshippers were forgotten.

When Jesus introduced what is known as the Lord's Prayer to his disciples, with instructions on how to go about offering acceptable prayer to God, his words provide a further commentary on the story of our parable.

‘And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly. But when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words. Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things that you have need of before you ask him’

[Matthew 6.5-8].

God knew the tax gatherer's need for forgiveness before he opened his mouth, but He delights to hear the genuine cries of those who confront the reality of sin in their lives. Psalm 40 is a good example. *‘For innumerable evils have surrounded me; my iniquities have overtaken me, so that I am not able to look up; they are more than the hairs of my head; therefore my heart fails me’* [Psalm 40.12].

In our parable, God resisted the approach of the proud Pharisee but listened to this pathetic figure hiding in the shadows of Herod's temple. Head bowed, his arms beating his chest, the tax collector felt the unseen presence of his God who sees and knows all things. Nothing

was allowed to distract him from uttering his fervent prayer with a trembling voice.

‘...GOD, BE MERCIFUL TO ME A SINNER’

This prayer consists of just seven words and is barely a sentence. Scarcity of words and absence of flowery language was no barrier to his prayer being heard. He had obviously heeded the advice of the wise man Solomon who wrote: *‘Do not be rash with your mouth, and let not your heart utter anything hastily before God. For God is in heaven, and you on earth; therefore let your words be few’* [Ecclesiastes 5.2].

What mattered was that this impassioned prayer for mercy came straight from the heart of a sinner overwhelmed by the seriousness of personal sin. Other versions convey how he felt his sin to be exceptional for example: *‘the sinner that I am’* (Rotherham). Similarly the Apostle Paul wrote, *‘that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief’* [1 Timothy 1.15].

The Bible teaches that all unrighteousness is sin. In today’s secular world sin is treated lightly, a far cry from the attitude of godly men like the priest Ezra. He prayed, *‘O my God: I am too ashamed and humiliated to lift up my face to you, my God; for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has grown up to the heavens. .. O LORD God of Israel, you are righteous, for we are left as a remnant, as it is this day. Here we are before you, in our guilt, though no one can stand before you because of this!’* [Ezra 9.6, 15].

The tax collector went down to his house justified, because his brief prayer showed an intelligent appreciation of how God’s mercy reaches a sinner. To quote the margin of the Revised Version, his prayer can be rendered *‘God be propitiated to me the sinner’*. Propitiation has to do with the way God’s righteous character is recognized when a sinless sacrifice is made, the blood shed providing a covering for sin.

John the Baptist described Jesus as *‘the Lamb of God who takes*

away the sin of the world [John 1.29]. Peter wrote of Christ, *‘who committed no sin...who himself bore our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness – by whose stripes you were healed’* [1 Peter 2.22,24]. And the apostle John wrote, *‘...if anyone sins, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. And he himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world’* [1 John 2.1, 2].

JUSTIFICATION

To be justified is to benefit from the work of Christ as Paul wrote to the Romans:

‘...even so through one man’s righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life...so also by one man’s obedience many will be made righteous’ [Romans 5.18,19].

David’s sin involving Bathsheba is well known, but how many are aware of his prayer for repentance afterwards:

‘Have mercy upon me, O God, According to your lovingkindness; According to the multitude of your tender mercies, Blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned, and done this evil in your sight – That you may be found just when you speak, and blameless when you judge’ [Psalm 51.1-4].

How mistaken the Pharisee was in thinking that his own righteous acts could earn him God’s approval! He was typical of many in Israel whom Paul described as having *‘...a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and seeking*

to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God [Romans 10.2, 3].

Salvation is not a right and cannot be earned as Paul reminded the Ephesian believers: *‘For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast’* [Ephesians 2.8, 9].

If God was as severe with sinners as the Pharisee was with lesser men than himself, then our position would be hopeless. However God’s judgment of us is measured with compassion and mercy. To be god-like is to behave as He does towards others. Jesus taught, *‘Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the same measure you use, it will be measured back to you’* [Matthew 7.1, 2].

TEACHING BY CONTRAST

As a good story teller Jesus used contrast to drive home, in his parable, the lesson he wanted to get over. *‘everyone who exalts himself will be abased, and he who humbles himself will be exalted’* [Luke 18.14]. In a few words our parable described the scene inside the temple. We are able to identify with the two characters chosen from the crowd of worshippers by Jesus to illustrate his point.

Another example of teaching by contrast is the parable of the Lost Sheep. *‘Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Jesus to hear him. And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, ‘This man receives sinners and eats with them’* [Luke 15.1]. Jesus then told the story of the man with a hundred sheep, who left ninety-nine in the wilderness while he went out to find the one which was lost. After a successful conclusion to the search, the joyful man called together his friends and neighbours and said to them *‘...Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost! I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over nine-nine just persons who need no repentance’* [Luke 15.6,7].

This was not an absurd comparison to make. Like the Pharisee we have been considering, all but one felt pleased with themselves and could see no reason why they should seek repentance. The one sheep who strayed from the flock and needed to be recovered equates with the tax collector in the temple, a self confessed sinner who prayed that God would be merciful to him.

It was in the temple that the chief priests and rulers confronted Jesus, questioning his authority. He asked them to consider the attitude of the two sons of a man who sent them to work in his vineyard. Although initially reluctant, the first son did come to his senses and went, whereas his younger brother failed to go although he had said he would. Jesus' critics immediately identified the first son in the parable as the one being commended.

They were stunned by the conclusion drawn by Jesus, equally relevant to the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. *'Assuredly, I say to you that tax collectors and prostitutes enter the kingdom of God before you' [Matthew 21.31].*

We hope that the lessons drawn by Jesus when he taught by parables, the stories contrasting two extremes to make the point, will not be lost on our readers.

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Does it matter what you believe?

THE ANSWER TO this question depends on whether or not you are concerned about the consequences of your belief. If you believe that the world is flat and do not mind the ridicule of other people, then it doesn't matter. However, if you believe that you can cross busy roads without looking out for passing vehicles, that belief could lead to very serious consequences if adhered to. Continuing in that belief is likely to lead to behaviour causing your death and the death of others, in which case **it does matter**.

When we ask - does it matter what you believe, in the context of what is written in God's Word, again it is important to examine the consequences of what we believe in order to decide whether it matters or not. From the beginning, in the book of Genesis, the consequences of belief and behaviour become very clear. We read:

‘And the LORD God commanded the man, saying,
“From every tree of the garden you may freely eat;
but **from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat the fruit of it you shall surely die.**”

[Genesis 2.16, 17]

The instructions about eating from the trees in the garden where God had put the man are very clearly set out here, as are the consequences of not following them. The man had no way of personally verifying the truth of what God had said; he had to believe it was true and subsequently the truth of this statement was challenged.

The serpent, one of the wild animals that God had made, said to Eve:

“Has God indeed said, ‘You shall not eat from every tree in the garden’?” ‘And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat the fruit of the trees of the garden; but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said, “you shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die.” And the serpent said to the woman **“You will not surely die, For God knows that in the day you eat it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”**” [Genesis 3.1-5]

Having received this advice which contradicted the Divine instructions, Eve was faced with a choice of who to believe. She and then Adam chose to believe the serpent rather than God:

‘So when the woman saw that the tree *was* good for food, that it *was* pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make *one* wise, **she took its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate**’ [Genesis 3.6].

The consequence of their behaviour as a consequence of their belief, was catastrophic:

‘Then to Adam he said, “Because you have heeded the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree of which I commanded you, saying, ‘You shall not eat from it’: “Cursed is the ground for your sake; in toil you shall eat from it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, and you shall eat the herb of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for dust you are, and to dust you shall return.”” [Genesis 3.17-19]

The words of the Apostle Paul remind us that it was also significant for the whole human race!

‘Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and **thus death spread to all men**, because all sinned’ [*Romans 5.12*].

Did it matter what Adam and Eve believed?

About 2,000 years later, the nation of Israel was faced with a choice of who to believe, which also had serious consequences. Having left slavery in Egypt under the leadership of Moses, they prepared to enter the land of Canaan which God had promised to give them. The twelve spies they sent out were told to investigate the fertility of the land and the military strength of the inhabitants. When the spies returned they brought back quantities of fruit as evidence of the fertility of the land [*Numbers 13.23*] and reported: ‘*We went to the land where you sent us. It truly flows with milk and honey and this is its fruit*’ [*Numbers 13. 27*]. Two of the spies, Joshua and Caleb reported:

‘The land we passed through to spy out is an exceedingly good land. If the LORD delights in us, then he will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land which flows with milk and honey. Only do not rebel against the LORD, nor fear the people of the land, for they are our bread; their protection has departed from them, and the LORD is with us. Do not fear them.’ [*Numbers 14.7-9*]

However, the other ten spies contradicted this belief with the words:

“We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we.” And they gave the children of Israel a bad report of the land which they

had spied out, saying, “The land through which we have gone as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people whom we saw in it are men of great stature”” [*Numbers 13.31, 32*].

Faced with a choice of who to believe, the Israelites chose to believe the ten spies and, rejecting the words of God’s promises, wanted to return to the land of slavery [*Number 14.4*]. As a consequence of this belief, God pronounced the following judgement:

“Except for Caleb the son of Jephunneh and Joshua the son of Nun, you shall by no means enter the land which I swore I would make you dwell in. But your little ones, whom you said would be victims, I will bring in, and they shall know the land which you have despised. But as for you, your carcasses shall fall in this wilderness. And your sons shall be shepherds in the wilderness forty years, and bear the brunt of your infidelity, until your carcasses are consumed in the wilderness. According to the number of the days in which you spied out the land, forty days, for each day you shall bear your guilt one year, namely forty years, and you shall know my rejection” [*Numbers 14.30-34*].

In the New Testament, the writer of the letter to the Hebrews says that the choice made by the Israelites was an example of unbelief, which led to their death during 40 years of wandering in the wilderness [*Hebrews 3.17-19*].

Other examples include Ahab, King of Israel who died in battle when he chose not to believe a prophet of God who informed him he would be killed, but chose to believe the prophets of his idols who predicted his victory [*I Kings 22.1-36*]. Later in their history the people of Judah did not believe the word of God through the prophet

Jeremiah. After the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian army, he told them to stay in the land and not to flee to Egypt because they would die there [*Jeremiah 42.1-22*].

These examples from the Old Testament illustrate how much it can matter what we believe, especially when it is a choice between believing or rejecting the Word of God. How then should we respond to the words of Jesus who was the Word of God made flesh? [*John 1.14*] Jesus told his disciples:

‘Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who **believes and is baptised will be saved**; but he who does not believe will be condemned’ [*Mark 16.15, 16*].

Jesus sets out very clearly the choice for all who hear the Gospel - belief and baptism that lead to salvation or unbelief that leads to condemnation. Note that action - in this case baptism, follows belief. We cannot claim to believe the Gospel and reject the necessity of baptism by total immersion in water. As the Apostle James wrote: *‘faith by itself, if it is does not have works, is dead’* [*James 2.17*].

What else does the Word of God in the New Testament tell us that followers of Jesus must believe and what actions should accompany those beliefs? The Apostle Paul made it clear to the believers at Corinth that belief in the resurrection was an essential part of the Gospel message. He wrote: *‘For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the Scriptures* [*1 Corinthians 15. 3, 4*].

However, he continued: *‘how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?’* [*1 Corinthians 15.12*]. This belief, Paul describes as sin: *‘Come back to your senses as you ought, and stop sinning; for there are some who are ignorant of God - I say this to your shame’* [*1 Corinthians 15.34 NIV*].

The Apostle Paul had equal condemnation for those who said *'the resurrection has already taken place, and they destroy the faith of some'* [2 Timothy 2.18 NIV]. This teaching *'will spread like gangrene'* and those who believe and teach this *'have wandered away from the truth'*. In contrast to these erroneous beliefs Paul declared at his trial before the Roman governor Felix: *'there will be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and the unjust'* [Acts 24.15]. Jesus himself had taught the same message:

‘Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear his voice and come forth - those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation’ [John 5.28,29].

This resurrection will occur at the return of Jesus to the earth (see 1 Thessalonians 4.16). The Apostle Peter warned the believers that a time will come when people will not believe it. They will deny it and say *'Where is this 'coming' he promised?'* [2 Peter 3.3,4 NIV].

What are the consequences if we do not believe in the Second Coming of Jesus? Does it really matter? In his prophecy about his return Jesus gave this warning:

‘Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap. For it will come upon all those who live on the face of the whole earth.’

[Luke 21.34,35 NIV]

Like Jesus, the Apostle Paul warned that the coming of Jesus will have destructive consequences for an unbelieving world:

‘But concerning the times and the seasons, brethren,

you have no need that I should write to you, for you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night. For when they say, “Peace and safety!” then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labour pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape.’ [1Thessalonians 5.1-3]

But for those who believe and prepare themselves there is the anticipation of salvation:

‘Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and **he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him**’ [Hebrews 9.28 NIV].

Does it matter what you believe?

In the quotation above from John chapter five, Jesus refers to those who have ‘*done good*’ and those who have ‘*done evil*’. The consequence of one is life after resurrection and the consequence of the other is death. This again begs the question ‘*does it matter what we believe about the way we live our lives?*’ In recent years, beliefs regarding many aspects of personal behaviour have changed dramatically, even among those who call themselves Christians. We must take an honest look at these beliefs in the light of Bible teaching.

Consider for example the teaching of Jesus about marriage and divorce. In answering a question about divorce [Mark 10.2] Jesus referred his hearers back to the creation of Adam and Eve [Mark 10.6] and drew the conclusion, ‘*Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate*’ [Mark 10.9]. When the disciples questioned Jesus about this teaching he replied: ‘*Whoever divorces his wife and marries commits adultery against her. And if a woman divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.*’ [Mark 10.11, 12]

This is a very uncompromising statement by Jesus, especially when

viewed through our 21st century eyes. Jesus says that he regards a second marriage after a divorce as adultery. The Bible makes the consequences of adultery very clear: *'for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral'* [Hebrews 13.4 NIV]. What we believe is fair or harsh in such circumstances does not count; what is important is whether or not we accept God's view of human behaviour.

Adultery is not the only behaviour that the Bible tells us will have devastating consequences. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

'Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.'

[1 Corinthians 6.9,10 NIV]

Jesus is going to return to the earth to set up the kingdom of God and what you and I believe and the way we behave will have far-reaching consequences. Paul wrote about the day when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven:

'in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his power, when he comes, in that day, to be glorified in his saints and to be admired among all those who believe...' *[2 Thessalonians 1.8-10].*

Does it matter what you believe? The answer to this vital question is truly a matter of life and death!

Simon Perfitt
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Bible teaching about...

the problem of suffering

THE EXISTENCE OF human suffering is one of the greatest barriers to a belief in the existence of a loving God. The question is often asked: *‘Why does God allow war and suffering?’* It is one of the arguments used by those who deny the existence of God.

The Bible however, does give us the answer to the question; the reason why so many people are troubled by the existence of suffering is that they do not understand what the Bible has to say on the subject. Most religious people believe that death – so often the result of suffering, is the gateway to a better life in heaven. This idea contradicts Bible teaching which reveals that death is the Divine punishment for sin. The Bible does offer a hope of everlasting life and freedom from suffering, but it is a hope of the resurrection of the body, not of immortal souls going to heaven at death.

THE REASON FOR DEATH

Suffering and death itself were brought about by man’s disobedience of God – we are all under the sentence of death because we all disobey Him. This came about in the first place as described in the first book of the Bible, Genesis chapters two and three. God is truly a God of love but there is also another side to His character, in that He cannot overlook wilful disobedience of His commandments.

Two contrasting aspects of God’s character are plainly revealed in the Scriptures. For example the Apostle Paul urges us to *‘consider the goodness and severity of God’* [Romans 11.22]. God created mankind

with free will; He was not interested in creating robots that would be programmed to obey Him, but in people who would do so of their own free will.

At the same time He warned our first parents that disobedience to His commands would bring death [*Genesis 2.17*]. They exercised their free will by disobeying God and death inevitably followed. However, we don't die merely because of the sin of Adam and Eve but because we inherit their sinful nature and we too, having free will, are sinners ourselves. The Apostle Paul endorsed the record in Genesis and summed up the natural state of the human race in these words:

‘.just as through one man (Adam) sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned.’ [*Romans 5.12*]

God has placed the sentence of death on us because we all sin. Death therefore comes about as a result of disobedience to God's commands. Unlike men and women, God always keeps His Word, and when He says that the punishment for sin is death, we have to accept what He is telling us.

PAIN IS NOT ALWAYS EVIL

But it may be asked, could not God have foreseen that mankind would disobey him and have created us in such a way that we would die without feeling pain? This is a complex issue - more so than most people realise. There are people who do not feel pain, but far from this being a blessing, such people are regarded by the medical profession as problematical because they don't learn one of the basic needs of life, which is to avoid accidents and other things that cause pain.

Pain is a necessary part of learning in this life. Children who suffer as a result of an accident for example, learn to avoid such accidents. Some pain is also desirable as a warning to us that something is wrong. A severe toothache warns us that the tooth is bad

and needs extracting. Without the pain, there would be little or no warning that anything was wrong.

More importantly, if we put our trust in God, pain and suffering are a necessary part of the development of character. We are told in the epistle to the Hebrews that Christ was made perfect through sufferings [*Hebrews 2.10*] and he suffered more than anyone. If we are rightly exercised by suffering when we experience it, it will help to mould our character, as we read again in the epistle to the Hebrews, quoting from the Old Testament:

‘...whom the Lord loves he chastens (disciplines),
and scourges every son whom he receives’
[Hebrews 12.6].

Adding his own inspired comment, the Apostle wrote:

‘Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but grievous; nevertheless, afterwards it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it’ [*Hebrews 12.11*].

Don’t miss the importance of that last phrase, ‘*to those who have been trained by it*’. People who deny the existence of God because of their own or other people’s suffering are clearly not being rightly trained in the matter!

GOD’S LOVE SHOWN THROUGH SUFFERING

The above statement from the letter to the Hebrews shows that suffering can be a sign of God’s love to those who are rightly exercised by it. God has also promised that although chastening is necessary for His sons and daughters while they have human nature, He will not allow them to be tempted (tried) more than they can bear, ‘*but with the temptation will also make the way of escape that you may be able to bear it*’ [*1 Corinthians 10.13*]. This demonstrates that through suffering,

God still loves those who are his true sons and daughters, as a parent loves the child he disciplines.

NATURAL DISASTERS

Some people are rightly concerned about earthquakes, floods, and hurricanes together with famine in the third world and similar disasters. Such events seem to strike indiscriminately and many seemingly innocent people suffer as a result. Could not a loving God have prevented such tragedies occurring?

These happenings are no doubt a direct result of the changed circumstances that occurred through the sin of our first parents when God placed a curse on the earth, a curse that will not be lifted until God's kingdom is established (compare Genesis 3.17-19 with Revelation 22.3). The wise man Solomon reminds us of this truth when he wrote:

‘The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise...but time and chance happen to them all. For man also does not know his time: Like fish taken in a cruel net. Like birds caught in a snare, so the sons of men are snared in an evil time, when it falls suddenly upon them.’

[Ecclesiastes 9.11, 12]

If God is left out of our lives, He should not be held to account, or His very existence challenged when things go wrong as a result of human error or mistake. Often man brings on himself disasters, either by greed, building in the wrong place, poor maintenance, or other causes. God allows us free will in such matters, so He cannot be blamed when things go wrong.

GOD HAS A PLAN

God plans to rid the earth of sin and death, along with all natural disasters, as He told his servant Moses:

‘But truly, as I live, all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD’ [*Numbers 14.21*].

The present situation, where man does what is right in his own eyes, but which is usually wrong in God’s eyes, does not fulfil that condition. It will only be attained when God sets up His kingdom over the earth, which He has promised to do through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Without the existence of suffering now, we would never appreciate the freedom from suffering that God has promised to those that love Him.

We are told in the Scriptures that God will abolish sin, suffering and death but it will be in His own time and in His own way. The Scriptures tell us what we know from experience to be true, that man is incapable of making such decisions for we read: ‘*It is not in man that walks to direct his steps*’ [*Jeremiah 10.23*].

SUFFERING CAUSED BY WAR

War is a major cause of suffering, both to the victims and those that love them, but it is brought about by the wickedness of man, despite attempts by some, through the U.N. and other organisations to stop wars. Their efforts are doomed to failure because we are told in the Scriptures that man is incapable of governing himself satisfactorily (for example see Isaiah 26.10, 11). In the letter of James we read these words:

‘Where do wars and fights come from among you?
Do they not come from your desires...that war in
your members? You lust and do not have. You
murder and covet and cannot obtain...’ [*James 4.1, 2*]

The Apostle James was referring to wars brought about by human lust, and there have been times in the past when God has used war for the furtherance of the Divine plan. This is going to happen again in

the future, which we believe to be near, when God will again use war as a judgment on the nations prior to the establishment of His kingdom on the earth.

When called upon to assist Christ in the work of judging this evil world, the true followers of Christ will be ready to do so, although they do not take part in man's wars. When Jesus stood before Pilate on trial for his life he said: *'My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now my kingdom is not from here'* [John 18.36].

WAR TO BE ABOLISHED

God has promised that when Jesus returns and establishes the kingdom of God upon earth, the *'inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness'* [Isaiah 26.9]. This righteousness will prevail over sin and result in a time of peace. The words of the prophets of Israel remind us that war will then be a thing of the past. For example Isaiah foretold that in the last days, the days of the future kingdom of God on earth, *'Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more'* [Isaiah 2.4].

Then, and only then, will be fulfilled the words of the angels at the birth of Jesus: *'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill towards men!'* [Luke 2.14]. The one cannot be fulfilled without the other - there will be no peace on earth until there is glory to God in the highest.

The effect of this will be a lasting peace, as we are told in the same prophecy of Isaiah: *'The work of righteousness will be peace; and the effect of righteousness, quietness and assurance for ever'* [Isaiah 32.17]. There are many other prophecies in the Scriptures that speak of this future time of peace and prosperity. Jesus, as the future king of the world, has been given the title *'the Prince of Peace'*, and the prophet adds, *'Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end'* [Isaiah 9.6, 7].

We see then that there can be no peace without righteousness (obedience to God). In fact, the Bible tells us that *'the wicked are like the troubled sea, when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt. "There is no peace", says my God, "for the wicked"'* [Isaiah 57.20, 21]. This shows us why peace cannot prevail in the present climate of godlessness. The verses we have quoted and others like them, show that God knows of man's desire for peace and that He has planned for it to happen when Jesus returns as the future king of the whole world.

There will come a time when God will remove the sentence of death through the work of His dear Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, a time when there will be no more human suffering and death itself will be no more, as we are told in the last book of the Bible:

'God will wipe away every tear from their eyes;
there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying;
and there shall be no more pain, for the former
things have passed away' [Revelation 21.4].

It is our wish that you with us may be among those accepted, and be ready to welcome the Prince of Peace when he returns from heaven to establish the kingdom of God on Earth.

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Birds of the Bible

The Peacock

THE PEACOCK IS the brilliantly coloured male of the peafowl. It is a large bird of the Pheasant family. The male is 33 inches in length including its long tail, while the female is approximately a third smaller in size than the male.



The peacock is particularly noted for its magnificent train of iridescent green and gold feathers, marked with large 'eye-spots' of blue. The train can be spread at will to form an impressive fan or screen. Peacocks shake their fanned train, producing a rustling sound and this causes the feathers to shimmer with iridescent hues. The bird's neck and breast are also a beautiful greenish-blue colour.

During courtship, peacocks display the 'eyed' train that appears like a very large fan, which is actually its enlarged upper tail-coverts

supported by the bristly feathers of its true tail. Peacocks have a varied diet of vegetable and animal food, which includes plant leaves, fruit, seeds, insects, etc. Along with other member birds of the Pheasant family, peacocks have readily taken to domestication.

During the reign of King Solomon, ships from Tarshish made regular voyages, returning laden with cargoes of gold, silver, apes and peacocks [*1.Kings.10. 22 KJV*]. Some of Solomon's ships went on journeys to Ophir (possibly in the Red Sea region or further afield - India) and others went to Tarshish (possibly Spain or somewhere in the Mediterranean region) where peacocks are included in the imported cargo. In view of the vague geographic details, there is no certainty as to the place, or country that these peacocks had originated from (Compare 1 Kings 9.26-28 and 2 Chronicles 9.21 KJV). It is quite possible that Solomon's agents obtained the peacocks from trading centres as his ships sailed along their usual trade routes. It is generally believed that these beautiful birds were abundant in India, Sri Lanka and were native to South East Asia.

Much later in history, Alexander the Great first saw peacocks when he invaded India. He was so impressed with their beauty, that he promptly passed a law stating that these birds were not to be killed. Later still however during the Roman domination of the ancient world, there was no such ruling, and birds of the pheasant family, including peacocks formed the centrepiece of the lavish feasts which the Romans delighted in.

Some Bible students believe that the Hebrew word [tuk-ki-yim.] for peacock is connected with the old Tamil name [tokei.] for this bird. Scientists assumed for centuries that there were no peacocks in Africa but this long held assumption was shattered in 1936, when the Congo peacock was discovered in the Belgian Congo.

There have also been attempts to link the Hebrew word [tuk-ki-

yim.] with the Egyptian word [ky] that refers to a type of Ape, however other translators do not agree with this view. Other translations do tend to confuse matters by using ‘monkeys’ [NKJV], baboon [NIV] and even ostrich in Job 39.13 [RSV & JB]. It is therefore interesting to note that the King James Version has a margin note which states that the Latin Vulgate has peacock for the Hebrew word [tuk-ki-yim.].

In view of these translation differences it is surely worth a quick look at the alternative considered to be ‘Ape’. The most striking fact is that the Hebrew word for Ape is [qohph.] not [tuk-ki-yim.] The other relevant point is that both apes and peacocks are included in the list of Solomon’s imports that his ships brought from other lands.

Because of its extraordinary beauty, the peacock has been highly regarded from ancient times to this day. It has also been an object of veneration, superstition, even idolatry where, for example some Hindus worship the bird as a deity. Today peacocks are highly regarded and are prized exhibits in zoos, wild life sanctuaries, stately homes and country parks and even as pets by some enthusiastic private owners.

The infinite beauty, wisdom, goodness and power of Almighty God are clearly observable in His creative works of which the peacock is a magnificent example. The Psalmist expresses it in these words:

‘The works of the LORD are great, sought out of all them that have pleasure therein. His work is honourable and glorious; and his righteousness endureth for ever. He hath made his wonderful works to be remembered...’ [*Psalm 111. 2-4 KJV*].

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