



Light

...on a New World

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Cover picture: Sunset over the Sea of Galilee

Note: All Bible quotations are taken from the New King James version
except where another version is indicated after the text.

Parables of Jesus

The Two Builders

THIS parable of Jesus may be most familiar to us through the words of the children's song *'The wise man built his house on the rock'*. When children sing the song, it is usually accompanied with actions, as *'the rain came down and the floods came up'*. In a way, this action song is an interesting analogy with Christ's parable, for that parable is also all about listening and doing. Jesus begins the parable in this way: *"Therefore whoever hears these sayings of mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock"* [Matthew 7.24].

If we look at the context of these words of Jesus, we see that *'these sayings of mine'* had particular reference to that great exposition of the Christian way of life known as the Sermon on the Mount (See picture page 23). In that discourse to his disciples, Jesus had set out a new way of life, a life where right thinking was as important as right actions. It was a way of life that placed the needs of others before self-interest, a way of life that focused more on the prospect of God's kingdom than on seeking present prosperity and power.

As the Sermon drew to a close, Jesus spoke of the narrow way to life and how few would find it. He also spoke about how to recognise true disciples: *'Therefore by their fruits you will know them'* [Matthew 7.20]. It was how people lived their lives that would demonstrate whether they had heard and understood what Christ was saying to them. This is the context of the giving of this parable.

THE BACKGROUND TO THE PARABLE

Jesus concludes the Sermon on the Mount with the parable about two builders. One man built his house on the sand, the other on the rock. Jesus was speaking the parable on a mountainside in the region of the Sea of Galilee. His listeners would be familiar with the picture he was outlining to them.



Dry river bed (wadi).

In the mountains around Galilee there were many dry river beds. At first, these might suggest a good site to build a house, nestling in a hollow, sheltered from the wind and partly shaded from the hot sun. That rosy prospect failed to take account of what would happen with the changes of the seasons. In the rainy season, that tranquil scene would be transformed, as the storms came and the mountains funnelled the rain into the narrow gulleys that all fed the once-dry river bed. What was once a nice sheltered spot would become a raging torrent.

Readers in the UK may recall that storm in a village called Boscastle a few years ago; those pictures illustrate the devastation that can arise when storm waters are focused into a narrow valley. Huge storms occur round the world every year, particularly in the tropical areas, bringing flash floods, destruction of homes, misery and loss of life.



When the flood waters rise and swirl around a house, its stability will depend on the quality of the foundations. If it is founded on loose ground, the surging waters will undermine the foundations, the superstructure will experience stresses and strains that it was never designed to withstand. Collapse is the inevitable consequence, and the house will be swept away. That is the picture Jesus presents of the man *'who hears these sayings of mine, and does not do them'* [Matthew 7.26].

This calamity is contrasted in the parable with a man who took the precautions to excavate through the sandy topsoil to find the underlying bedrock. On that bedrock, the man built strong foundations which were able to withstand the surging waters. In Jesus' day, this was done by building a series of stone arches that were tied into the bedrock and which formed the piles on which the foundations of the house were secured. In his early life Jesus was a carpenter, but as today, that trade was closely involved in building work, and so Jesus may well have had practical experience of constructing such a secure foundation.

As well as having building experience, Jesus also knew the Old Testament scriptures better than any man before or since. He would bring to mind two passages from the Proverbs that probably provided the inspiration for his parable:

‘When the whirlwind passes by, the wicked is no more,
but the righteous has an everlasting foundation.’

[Proverbs 10.25]

‘The wicked are overthrown and are no more, but the
house of the righteous will stand’ *[Proverbs 12.7]*.

Combining his practical experience of building with his peerless knowledge of the Scriptures, Jesus presents us with a powerful and instructive illustration of the different ways an individual can respond to his teaching.

WHAT DOES THE PARABLE MEAN?

The first important lesson that comes from considering this parable is that the builders both had a choice. They could build on the sand or on the rock. The man who built on the sand probably thought at first that he had made the best choice. He had avoided all that time, energy and money that would be required to construct those stone arches that nobody would ever see because they would be below ground level.

Because of the money he had saved, he could afford a bigger house with more elaborate fixtures and fittings. It would be finished much quicker, and he could be enjoying his new home before his neighbour had even finished the ground floor of his house. I expect that many older and wiser people had warned him of the dangers of what he was doing, but he chose to trust his own judgement. But then *'the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell'* [Matthew 7.27].

That is the picture Jesus portrays of the man who hears his teaching, but ignores it. Superficially, that man may appear to be better off. His house is bigger, it is better appointed and it is more luxurious, **but...** And it is the **'but'** that is so important. All those apparent advantages were worth nothing, because they wouldn't last. Everything would be swept away when the storm came. Jesus makes the contrast with the other builder, who faced with the same choices, made a wise decision. It was a decision that declared his intention to build something that would last, rather than something that was superficially attractive but would not last.

That is what choosing to follow Christ's teaching is like. If you read the Sermon on the Mount, you will realise that the challenge Jesus sets before us is not an easy one. To bring our natural instincts under control and to love others more than ourselves are things which are not easy. They require great diligence and effort, and superficially are not as attractive as a life of self-gratification. But the way of Christ is a life that does give enormous satisfaction; it is a life that is building something with the help of God, something that will last, not just for a lifetime but forever.

THE TRUE FOUNDATION

Another important point to notice is that both men set out with the intention to build. They probably had similar basic materials for the construction – wood and stone. The only difference between the two is the foundation on which they built. And this surely is the key to the

parable; we must make sure we are building on the right foundation. This is what the Apostle Paul had to say about those who respond to the teaching of the gospel:

‘Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner-stone’ [*Ephesians 2.19,20*].

The chief corner-stone is the most important part of the building. It is the reference point from which the whole building is marked out, and provides the keystone that binds together the two sides of a building. Without the corner-stone, there would be no building. That must come first; but there must also be other foundation stones to provide the platform on which the building can stand. This is what Paul is describing. Jesus is the essential basis for our lives. The work of the apostles and prophets is intimately linked into that abiding corner-stone and taken together, that collection of teaching, guidance and instruction, can provide us with a secure foundation for our lives.

In that passage to the Ephesians, Paul goes on to explain what it is we are doing when we build upon this foundation. He says of the corner-stone:

‘in whom the whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a habitation of God in the Spirit.’
[Ephesians 2:21, 22]

The house of which Jesus spoke in his parable is therefore no mundane dwelling for an artisan, or even for a nobleman. The work we are called to is to help prepare a place where God will dwell. It is therefore the most important building that has ever been built anywhere in the world at any time in history. To assist in this most noble of

works, Jesus instructs us to hear his sayings and do them [Matthew 7.24].

THE CHALLENGE FACING US

We have seen that building a house for God involves hearing the words of Jesus and doing them. In this very simple statement there are two enormous challenges that each of us must face up to and answer. The first is to honestly ask the question '*Do I know what Jesus said?*' The plain truth is that most people don't know what Jesus said. They think they know, or they might know what someone else has said about Jesus' teaching. But when there is something very important that we should know, would we rely on a casual acquaintance with the facts, or on a second-hand account of the information? Surely we would look the matter up for ourselves to make sure we understood the facts and the implications that flow from that knowledge.

So Jesus challenges us to hear '*these sayings of mine*'. There is only one way to hear Jesus today. You cannot go into the synagogues of Galilee, or into the remote places where Jesus often resorted to teach. You must go back to the records of what Jesus said and did. These were written down under Divine inspiration by men who travelled with him for three and a half years, or who were close associates of those who did accompany Jesus during his ministry. Listen to what Jesus had to say; spend time tracing how many of his words find their roots in the teaching of the Old Testament. So many today condemn the teaching of Christ without even the courtesy of giving it a hearing. The first step is to give Jesus a chance to be heard.

But as Jesus made clear, listening is only half the story. He also demanded that those who heard also did. That means that the things we hear and understand are intended to provoke a response. Hearing and even understanding of themselves are pointless. We could keep listening with the result that we could recite verbatim every recorded word Jesus spoke. We might be able to pass every examination that the theological colleges of the world could set, but that would not make us

a follower of Christ. Knowledge requires action; theory must become practice; we must learn to be followers as well as listeners.

This brings us back to an earlier point. We have to make choices. We can either build our life on the things we see around us – but that is like the shifting sand. The alternative is to dig – to dig into the word of God and find that true bedrock on which we can build a stable and enduring life. The purpose of *Light Magazine* is to encourage you to dig into God's Word and find truth and stability for your life. This leads us to the final and most important point. If we dig to find the firm foundation and if we build on that foundation, then what we build will last forever. We mentioned these two short passages from the Proverbs that probably inspired Jesus' parables.

‘When the whirlwind passes by, the wicked is no more,
but the righteous has an everlasting foundation.’

[Proverbs 10.25]

‘The wicked are overthrown and are no more, but the
house of the righteous will stand’ *[Proverbs 12.7]*.

By comparing proverb and parable, it is clear that those who build on the sand are the wicked, whose destiny is to be ‘*no more*’. But the wise builder has an everlasting foundation, and a house that will stand. And the simple reason why that house will stand is that it is nothing less than the House of God!

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IN the first chapter of the first book of the Bible, there is an account of the creation of the world and at the end of that chapter we read these words: ‘...*God saw everything that he had made, and indeed it was very good*’ [Genesis 1.31]. If we accept the Biblical account of creation there is this very perplexing question to answer – **What has gone wrong with the world?**

The human race is certainly a bewildering mixture of good and bad these days as it has always been but we now live in a world which is increasingly beset by evil. We are bombarded with it by the news media every day. If they had to rely on good news for their stories, the newspapers would not be around for very long, for good news does not sell newspapers. Of course, there are people who are moved by tenderness, care and compassion for their fellows and yet every day the news media tell us horror stories of war, terrorism, murder, muggings, rape, brutality and suffering. Man’s inhumanity to man seems limitless – but why?

Are we just animals in the process of evolving into something better as some would have us believe – or is there another answer to this perplexing question? Is it the work of an outside supernatural agency called the devil? Or is it we ourselves who are to blame?

If we study the Bible with an open mind, we shall find the answers to these questions. God, who created us in the first place, has left on

record all we need to know about our existence – where we came from – why we are here and where we are going. The Bible speaks very plainly about our present state and it predicted long ago the evil state of the world which we see around us today. The words may be unpalatable, but the prophet Jeremiah gives us the Divine assessment of humanity in general: *‘The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?’* [Jeremiah 17.9 NIV]. The wise man Solomon had much to add to these words. In the book of Ecclesiastes he makes an assessment of the human race in these words:

‘So I turned my mind to understand, to investigate and to search out wisdom and the scheme of things and to understand the stupidity of wickedness and the madness of folly... “Look”, says the Teacher, “this is what I have discovered: adding one thing to another to discover the scheme of things – while I was still searching but not finding – I found one upright man among a thousand, but not one upright woman among them all. This only have I found: God made mankind upright, but men have gone in search of many schemes”’ [Ecclesiastes 7.25, 27-29 NIV].

Those words were written some 3,000 years ago – has anything changed for the better? Those who leave God out of account and tell us that we are gradually evolving into something better will be disappointed – the trend seems to be in the opposite direction! The schemes which Solomon referred to have resulted in a world today that fears the results of man’s ingenuity – the phrase **‘weapons of mass destruction’** has been used a lot in recent years and this is the result of the human mind that has turned away from God.

THE TEACHING OF JESUS

In Mark’s Gospel record there are some words of Jesus about the state of humanity. His disciples had failed to understand some of his teaching. The religious leaders had accused them of not carrying out

the ritual washing required by their traditions before eating food. Jesus used this as an opportunity to draw attention to the failure of these religious Jews to keep the Law of Moses and reminded them of the words of the prophet Isaiah: *'...in vain they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men. For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men...'* [Mark 7.7, 8]. There is a telling phrase here – *'Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men'*. Jesus used this to draw a very important lesson for his disciples:

‘And he said “What comes out of a man, that defiles a man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a man”’ [Mark 7.20-23].

The point is that no amount of washing can cleanse us from sin – for this is part of our very nature. Jesus tells us that sin comes from within and prompts us to carry out evil of every kind, whether it be thieving, adultery, violence, rape or murder – all these evil characteristics come from the heart of man and from nowhere else. Note how specific Jesus is on this point. Do you think he would have told his disciples this if the devil was to blame?

The way to prevent these things happening is by cleansing the heart – not by the ritual washing of the hands as the Pharisees often did. Cleansing the heart is achieved by following the commandments given in God’s Word – the greatest of which are to *‘love the LORD your God’* and to *‘love your neighbour as yourself’* [Mark 12.29, 30]. Putting these words into action involves a struggle with ourselves – **the enemy within**. This great struggle is an overriding part of the true Christian’s life – to overcome those characteristics which Jesus said come from within. What a different place the world would be if every one was motivated in this way.

LIGHT ON A NEW WORLD

AN ACCOUNT OF A PERSONAL STRUGGLE

The Apostle Paul wrote a letter to the 1st century Christians in that decadent city of Rome. In chapter seven he describes the constant struggle which he had against sin. Note that the Apostle's teaching is devoid of any reference to the Devil of popular Christianity – the Apostle Paul would have mentioned it if the Devil is the one who prompts us to do evil. Instead he wrote this:

‘So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?’ [Romans 7.21-24 NIV]

Paul’s words underline the teaching of Jesus in Mark chapter seven and no-one is exempt from this ‘*law of sin*’ as he puts it.

THE TEACHING OF JAMES

We have not considered specific Bible verses which mention the word devil of which there are many. It is important to establish first that evil thoughts and evil actions come from within us. This is called ‘*sin*’ in the Bible – which also tells us that ‘*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*’ [Romans 3.23]. To establish this point beyond a shadow of doubt, James tells us plainly that God, our Creator, does not influence us to do evil: ‘*Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he himself tempt anyone*’ [James 1.13]. James goes on to describe the process that leads us to commit sin:

‘But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed’ [James 1.14].

James is very emphatic – temptation and sin come from within the evil heart of man – this is the consistent teaching of God’s Word. The apostle then goes on to use a figure which everyone will understand – he likens sin and its consequences to the pattern of life itself:

‘Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death’ [*James 1.15*].

OLD TESTAMENT REFERENCES TO THE DEVIL AND SATAN

In order to understand the passages of Scripture which mention the Devil or Satan, we must keep these overriding principles in mind. Most of the references to the devil are in the New Testament. There are just four passages in the Old Testament which refer to devils – in each case it is clear from the context that these references are about the pagan gods of the nations which surrounded Israel – in other words, gods of wood and stone, or idols as we would call them.

One example from Psalm 106 will suffice. This Psalm is a summary of the history of the nation of Israel from the time of the Exodus from Egypt onwards. The Psalm is about rebellion against God – child sacrifices and devil or demon worship. Here are the origins of the ideas which came into the early church and which were later used to great effect in terrifying people with the threat of hell fire and everlasting torments administered by the devil and his subject demons. *‘They even sacrificed their sons and their daughters to demons, and shed innocent blood, even the blood of their sons and daughters, whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan...’* [*Psalm 106.37,38*].

Such ideas originate from pagan worship and have no place in the teaching of God’s Word. As a result of their rebellion against God, the nation of Israel was punished as we note from the following verses. Notice the emphasis in these verses: *‘Therefore the wrath of the LORD was kindled against his people’* [verse 40]; *he gave them into the hand of the Gentiles’* [verse 41]. The idea that God brings evil on mankind

may sound strange – but this is the consistent teaching of the Bible. We must distinguish between the evil that God brings on mankind for disobedience and that which we bring on ourselves and each other. The latter is sin – which in the Bible is often personified as the devil. God has no equal, no rival, as we see from many passages of Scripture. There is no room for a personal devil in this teaching from the Old Testament.

There are a number of references to the word **satan** in the Old Testament which are again used to support the idea of a personal devil. Satan is a Hebrew word – a word that simply means **adversary**. The English translators of the Bible have sometimes translated it by the word **adversary** and sometimes they have transposed the original Hebrew word **satan** into the English text. There is nothing to support this approach, apart from the obvious bias of the translators, who themselves believed in a personal devil.

You can perhaps understand the predicament of those who translated the original text of the Bible. Their minds were clouded by a misconception about the Bible doctrine concerning the devil and satan. Read again the passages in the Old and New Testaments with the help of a concordance, substituting the word adversary for the word satan. It will make the verses very much clearer. In the light of what we have already considered concerning the origin of evil, you will find no evidence to support the idea of a personal devil.

NEW TESTAMENT REFERENCES TO THE DEVIL AND SATAN

The New Testament was written in Greek and consequently the word devil is usually a translation from the Greek word *diabolos* which simply means someone who is a false accuser – literally it means to strike through as with a dart or other sharp object. The meaning in Scripture is to strike through with sharp words and so it means false accuser or slanderer. In writing to Timothy the Apostle Paul refers to a time which he calls '*the last days*' and in this chapter he describes the condition of the world at that time.

A careful reading of this passage will lead us to conclude that the Apostle is giving an apt description of the times in which we live. He wrote to Timothy:

‘But know this, that in **the last days** perilous times will come: for men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God’ [2 Timothy 3.1-4].

Doesn’t this sum up the state of the world today? In these words we find the characteristics which Jesus tells us come from within – Note that verse three mentions ‘*slanderers*’ – in the original Greek of the New Testament it is the word *diabolos* – it could have been translated ‘*devils*?’ – it describes a class of people who exhibit that evil characteristic of striking through with sharp words – in other words slanderers.

The Apostle John records some telling words of Jesus addressed to his twelve Disciples: “*Did I not choose you, the twelve, and one of you is a devil?*” [John 6.70]. Jesus was referring to that man who would betray him with a false accusation – Judas Iscariot was a devil! There is no suggestion of anything here other than the straightforward facts concerning Judas. This is the principle we must apply when looking at all Bible references to the devil.

Christ’s messages to the seven churches of Asia Minor (now Turkey) are recorded in the last book of the Bible. The message to Smyrna (now Izmir) contains these encouraging words: ‘*Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison that you may be tested...*’ [Revelation 2.10]. In this passage we see another use of the Greek word *diabolos* – In this case it simply refers to the Roman authorities in the 1st Century, who as we know from history, persecuted the Christians

and falsely accused them, committing many of them to prison for their beliefs. They were the slanderers or false accusers of Christ's brethren – the 'devil' referred to in Christ's message.

In the Gospel records we read about the temptation of Jesus. Matthew's record tells us that: *'Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil' [Matthew 4.1]*. Notice one very important phrase here – Jesus was *'led up by the Spirit'*. In other words he had the power to do all the things mentioned in the temptations – to satisfy hunger by turning stones to bread – secondly, to demonstrate his power to the people by jumping from the pinnacle of the temple and thirdly, to take control of the kingdoms of the world there and then. This was a task which he knew from his understanding of the Divine plan was appointed for him to carry out in God's good time.

The temptations were very great – we must not underestimate them. But they came from the old enemy within – his own thoughts as he spent those weeks alone in the wilderness. We read in the letter to the Hebrews that Jesus *'was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin' [Hebrews 4.15]*. All temptation come from within, as the Apostle James reminds us in that passage we've considered already (see page 12). With Christ it was no different – except that he resisted the temptations throughout his life – *'Which of you convicts me of sin?'* he challenged his adversaries on one occasion *[John 8.46]*.

If we can understand the origin of sin, we will see that there is no room at all in the teaching of God's Word for a personal devil. The Apostle Paul tells us in his letter to the Romans: *'Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man (Adam), and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned' [Romans 5.12 NIV]*.

THE SERPENT IN EDEN

Many Christians believe that the serpent that tempted our first

parents in Eden was in reality the devil or satan and it was the devil who brought sin into the world. This unscriptural teaching is apparently supported by some words of Jesus in confrontation with the Jews in Jerusalem. He accused them of perverting the Truth in some very strong words: *'You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do'* [John 8.44].

Again, remember the teaching of Scripture elsewhere – the Bible does not contradict itself. In this passage from John's Gospel record, the word devil is used by Jesus to represent the serpent which had the power of speech. By a clever deception and a lie the serpent caused our first parents to sin. We have only to read the account in Genesis chapter three to see that the serpent was just a reptile with the power of speech. Afterwards this reptile was cursed by God, its creator – but the damage had been done – the serpent was the tempter who counselled our first parents to believe a lie rather than obey the command of God. In the same way Jesus likened the religious leaders of the Jews to the serpent which said to Adam and Eve *'You will not surely die'* [Genesis 3.4] or in the words of Jesus *'He is a liar and the father of it'* [John 8.44].

Our first parents did eat the forbidden fruit and because of their disobedience they and all their descendants became subject to what the Bible calls *'the law of sin and death'*. The world is populated at this present time by billions of dying sinners – demonstrating the fulfilment of God's words to Adam: *'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 3.19].

We have only mentioned a few of the many references which refer to the devil. To sum up, the Scriptural principles are very clear in both the Old and New Testaments. There is nothing in Scripture to support the idea that a personal devil exists as a force for evil. The Bible clearly demonstrates that evil thoughts come from within and prompt us to sin. The devil and satan are Bible terms used to personify the

evil promptings of the human mind which we have inherited from our first parents and which if not checked cause us to sin.

A PERSONAL MESSAGE

Dear reader, **the world at present is in a sorry state as a result of SIN.** That's really the answer to the question posed by the title of this article – **‘So what has gone wrong with the world?’** We live in those *‘perilous times’* that Paul predicted in his letter to Timothy [2 Timothy 3.1]. But there is hope for the future – God has promised to make great changes which will eventually result in the complete elimination of sin and its consequences – for death itself will eventually be destroyed [1 Corinthians 15.26]. God's plan for the world is summed up in these words that God said to his servant Moses: *‘but truly, as I live, all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD’* [Numbers 14.21].

On a personal level the message of the Bible is all about the hope of being saved from death. You too can share this hope for the future if you are prepared to acknowledge your present sinful state and seek that way which will give you assurance and a life with new meaning in a world full of uncertainty. The Apostle Paul put it like this in his letter to the 1st Century Christians in Rome:

‘...the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord’ [Romans 6.23].

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What did Jesus Mean?

‘For great is your reward in heaven’

THE impact of Christ’s teaching is reflected in the words of some of his hearers who said: *‘No man ever spoke like this man’* [John 7.46]. There was often a deeper meaning to his words than what they appeared to convey at face value.

As an example of this, we read in the gospel record of John about the incident of Jesus cleansing the temple at the feast of Passover. This he did by driving out the traders and the money-changers, who had set up a money-making monopoly in their services to the devout worshipper. Their actions were a desecration of the temple which Jesus viewed as his *‘Father’s house’* and a house of prayer for His people [John 2.13-17].

A DIFFICULT SAYING

Challenged by the rulers as to his authority in doing what he did, Jesus replied: *‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up’* [John 2.19]. Baffled by this answer, the authorities could only think in terms of the temple structure which had already taken forty six years in building. Jesus, however, knowing that the rulers were out to destroy him, applied the word *‘temple’* as a symbol of his own body [John 2.21]. The full and intended meaning of these words of Jesus dawned on the disciples, if not the rulers, much later when he rose from the dead. Then the disciples discerned the deeper meaning of the saying and rejoiced in it as a fulfilment of the prophetic words of Jesus.

At other times, Jesus would pre-suppose some understanding on the part of his hearers. When hypothetical questions were put to him

based on erroneous ideas, he said: *'You are mistaken, not knowing the Scriptures'* [Matthew 22.29]. To know the Scriptures – their teaching (including our particular subject), the best way is to compare Scripture with Scripture. To examine a verse in isolation will more likely lead to an incorrect interpretation and the charge, *'you are mistaken'*.

A PROMISE TO THE DISCIPLES

Adopting the procedure of searching the Scriptures therefore, we can begin by tracing the origin of this saying of Jesus – *'for great is your reward in heaven'* [Matthew 5.12]. It is part of the Sermon on the Mount and occurs just before Jesus speaks to the disciples, likening them to *'the salt of the earth'*. In the work that lay before them of preaching the gospel of the coming kingdom of God, the blessings to which Jesus alluded in his sermon, would be mingled with hostility and bitter persecution, which they would suffer for Christ's sake.

They would tread the same path as Israel's prophets of old of whom the Apostle James wrote: *'My brethren, take the prophets, who spoke in the name of the Lord, as an example of suffering and patience'* [James 5.10]. Matthew's testimony is similar for he records how Jesus forewarned the disciples, *'Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for my sake.'* Then he gives them this assurance for faithful service on their part: *"Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, **for great is your reward in heaven**, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you"* [Matthew 5.11, 12].

On a superficial reading of verse 12, it would seem that faithful disciples go to heaven to receive their reward and this is the interpretation believed by many people who call themselves Christians. If that was the only passage in the Bible referring to a future reward for the believer, such an interpretation may well sound plausible. However, there are a number of passages that teach otherwise and a correct understanding can only be arrived at by comparing the teaching of this verse with other Scriptural passages.

THE REWARD – IN HEAVEN OR ON EARTH?

There are two possible conclusions to be drawn from this teaching of Jesus. Either the faithful go to heaven to obtain the reward, or the reward comes from heaven to the faithful, here on earth. Let us now look at some passages which clearly state that the reward comes to the faithful.

We note that just before saying this, Jesus had made a series of statements called ‘The Beatitudes’ (See picture page 23) one of which was a quotation from Psalm 37: *‘Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth [Matthew 5.5].* In the first letter of Peter, the reward is linked to the greatest miracle of all time – the resurrection of Jesus Christ:

‘Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to his abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, *reserved* in heaven for you’ [1 Peter 1.3, 4].

The Word of God is not contradictory and we can see in the above reference the qualification that the **source** of the reward is **‘in heaven’** but that it is **‘reserved’**. Yes, the reward is kept or held back until, as we read in the last eight words of verse 5 – it is **‘ready to be revealed in the last time’** [1 Peter 1.5]. This same view is expressed in the Apostle Paul’s letter to Timothy, where in faith he looks forward to the day of resurrection:

‘I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing’ [2 Timothy 4.7,8].

JESUS TO RETURN TO THE EARTH

It is clear from Matthew's gospel record, that the reward 'reserved' in heaven comes to the righteous and that it is to be given on earth. Let's examine this reference and picture the scene when the disciples saw Jesus ascend in a bodily form to heaven. As they were looking up to heaven they heard the voices of angels saying: '*...why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw him go into heaven*' [Acts 1.11].

It is evident from what we read elsewhere in his gospel, that this was believed by the writer Matthew, who wrote these words concerning the return of Jesus to the earth:

'For the Son of Man will come in the glory of his Father with his angels, and *then* he will reward each according to his works' [Matthew 16.27].

In the very last chapter of the book of the Revelation, a further reminder of Christ's return to the earth is given by him to believers, some of whom meanwhile, will have lost their faith:

'He who is unjust, let him be unjust still; he who is filthy, let him be filthy still; he who is righteous, let him be righteous still; he who is holy, let him be holy still. And behold, **I am coming** quickly, and **my reward is with me**, to give to every one according to his work'.

[Revelation 22.11, 12]

A TIME OF JUDGEMENT

Here, we are taught that the reward encompasses both the righteous and that other class described as '*unjust*' and '*filthy*'. This means the nature of the reward will be different in both cases. The reward is meted out, as the record states '*to every one according to his work*'.



*Sea of Galilee from The Mount of Beatitudes - the suggested place
where Jesus gave the Sermon on the Mount*

We have already seen that a righteous person's reward is the gift of eternal life to be given at the return of Jesus. It is a reward that will befit him for a place in the Kingdom of God. What then is the reward for the *'unjust'*, the *'filthy'*, in other words the unrighteous? Matthew tells us in his gospel record. Again, the scene pictured, connects with the return of Jesus Christ to the earth:

'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And he will set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right hand, "Come, you blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world"' [Matthew 25.31-34].

The figure of speech for the righteous is clearly that they are of the *'sheep'* class. The stubborn, the unjust, the filthy, the unrighteous, are represented by the *'goats'* and noting the last verse of the above chapter, we see the reward that is *reserved* for them. *'And these will go*

away into everlasting punishment, (they remain in their mortal state and die) but the righteous into eternal life' [Matthew 25.46].

THE THIEF ON THE CROSS

Many Christians are persuaded that Christ's words to the thief on the cross also prove that heaven is where the reward will be enjoyed. But again, look at the verse in the context of the whole chapter. Don't overlook either, the added information in Luke chapter 24. What was the question? *'Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom'*. What was the reply of Jesus? *'Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise' [Luke 23.43]*. The question was clearly framed on the basis that the thief was requesting a place in **the coming of a future event** – an event anticipated by the Apostle Paul in his expectation, already referred to earlier in this article [2 Timothy 4.8].

The reply of Jesus conforms to Hebrew phraseology in the words, *'I say to you, today...'* Consider for example, similar expressions:

'I have set before you today, life and good' [Deuteronomy 30.15];

'You are witnesses this day' [Ruth 4.9];

'I have this day declared it to you' [Jeremiah 42.21].

'If you had known... in this your day' [Luke 19.42];

This style of language used by Jesus shows that in his reply to the thief on the cross, the comma is misplaced in the text and should appear after *'today'* rather than before it, giving the sense, *I say to you now*. The reader should bear in mind the fact that early New Testament Greek manuscripts did not have any punctuation at all. For those readers who dismiss the punctuation argument, we must look to the Scriptures to see that Christ was not in paradise the day he was crucified.

Foretelling his death, Jesus plainly said: *'so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth' [Matthew 12.40]*. How could the Son of Man be both in paradise and in the earth at the

same time? After his resurrection, Jesus said to Mary, *'Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to my Father...'* [John 20.17].

PARADISE ON EARTH

These passages also make groundless belief in the immortality of the soul which is not a Bible doctrine. Jesus remained on earth another forty days after his resurrection (see Acts 1.3). His ascension was in bodily form, not as a disembodied soul – for *'in like manner'* the disciples were assured that he would return to the earth [Acts 1.11]. The believer in heaven-going-at-death may now concede the merit of re-punctuation should he or she accept that *'paradise'* could not have been in heaven. As already stated, the repentant thief was looking forward to a future event which agrees with Jesus' reference to paradise.

In the Bible, *'paradise'* is always associated with a place on earth. It is a translation of the original Greek language of the New Testament. The Greek word *paradeisos* describes a large pleasure-garden with trees. It's derived from a Persian word describing a park belonging to an Eastern monarch or noble. The word *'paradise'* is therefore descriptive of a place of beauty on earth and not in heaven. Consider the following:

'...To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.'

[Revelation 2.7]

RESURRECTION AND JUDGEMENT

The allusion to the Garden of Eden is unmistakable. The Garden of Eden is used to describe the paradise-like condition of the earth in the Kingdom of God (see for example Genesis 13.10; Isaiah 51.3; Ezekiel 36.35) Jesus taught that *eternal life* is preceded by the resurrection and judgment at the last day:

‘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*].

The prophet Daniel foretold a time when God will intervene in this world’s affairs and many will be raised from the dead. Those who are found faithful will be given the reward of eternal life. He described that time as ‘*a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation*’ [*Daniel 12.1*]. At that time Daniel wrote:

‘...many of those that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt’ [*Daniel 12.2*].

Whether we look at the Old or New Testament, the Scriptures as a whole unite together in their teaching that the ultimate location of the reward promised to the righteous is on this earth. The Psalmist therefore adds his testimony so that we need not be mistaken:

‘The heaven, even the heavens, are the LORD’S; but the earth he has given to the children of men’ [*Psalms 115.16*].

‘The righteous shall inherit the land, and dwell in it for ever’ [*Psalms 37.29*].

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‘Marvellous are Your Works’

THERE are many unique features of the kangaroo rat that make it an excellent example of our Creator’s intelligent design. There are approximately 22 different species of kangaroo rat, and they are found mainly in the more arid regions of the western and south-western United States of America.

Whereas most animals need to consume water at regular intervals to stay alive, the kangaroo rat survives without drinking water and has many special features to enable it to do this. It lives in the desert and its diet consists mostly of dry seeds, but the little moisture that it *can* extract from them is put



to good use! Most of the water in this little animal’s body is created by chemical reactions that take place after ingesting food to augment the minimal water intake from the seed itself.

The kangaroo rat has pouches on the outside of its mouth for the storage and carrying of seeds from one place to another. These pouches are unlike those of a hamster in that they are accessible from the outside of the mouth so that the animal does not have to open its mouth and lose water unnecessarily.

Mammals generally pant or sweat to keep cool when the weather gets hot in the summer months; the kangaroo rat does not. Instead it has been designed with hairless ears by which it can lose heat readily when it gets too hot. Also, the kangaroo rat has the ability to dig efficiently with its front paws so that it may hide from the heat of the sun, far below the surface of the sand.

These remarkable animals have been equipped with a fantastic jumping mechanism that does not use much energy and which is very similar to that of Australia's red kangaroos. These powerful legs enable the little rat to jump distances up to six feet! This means the animal can make a quick escape when being pursued by predators such as snakes, owls or hawks.

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of the kangaroo rat is its ability to conserve water through its kidney, so that urination is virtually unnecessary. In most mammalian kidneys a microscopic structure called the 'loop of Henle' absorbs a proportion of the body's water, leaving a much smaller volume, along with waste products, to be passed out in the urine. For example, in the human kidney 180 litres of fluid are reclaimed for every litre finally excreted. In the kangaroo rat these loops are much longer relative to other animals, and have the capacity to filter waste from water so efficiently that very little water is lost through urination. On average, this little creature expels only two drops of urine in a day!

God has equipped this little creature with all these special characteristics that enable it to survive. Many other creatures use some of these survival tactics to keep cool and conserve water, but the kangaroo rat is unique in that it has a combination of so many of these procedures. It may seem slightly curious to us that this mammal lives in the desert where it cannot drink water, but God has decided to create variety in nature so that we may be awe-struck and marvel at His wisdom in design!

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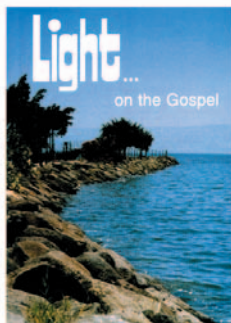
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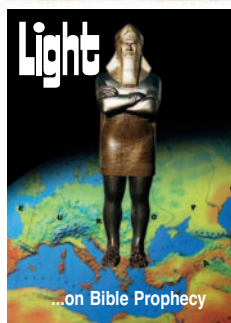
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