

Light

...on a new world



a quarterly magazine focusing on the Bible
and its message for today

Signs in our Times

King Hezekiah

**The development of the
First Century Church**

VOLUME 23.4

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The Christadelphians believe the Bible (Old and New Testaments) to be the wholly inspired and infallible Word of God. Its principal theme is the salvation of mankind through the saving work of Jesus Christ and the setting up of the kingdom of God under his rulership when he returns to the earth.

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CONTENTS	Page
From the Editor	1
The development of the first century Church:	
Part 8: the ecclesia at Antioch	3
From our mail bag	11
Bible Characters: King Hezekiah	14
Bible Teaching about:	
The Christian way of life	21
Signs in our Times	29

Cover picture:
Detail of the Madaba Map, a unique floor mosaic (see page 22)

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

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from the Editor

This edition of 'Light on a new world' sees the first major changes to the format of the magazine since the first issue was produced over 40 years ago.

These changes include a new logo, a new font and a new layout for both text and pictures including a two column page format. The content of the magazine will continue as before, with articles on a wide range of Bible related topics and it is our hope that readers will benefit from these changes.

We live in a world that is constantly changing – but not always for the better. Compared with even 50 years ago, most of us benefit from the changes that have been made possible through modern inventions. As an example, the first mobile phones or cellphones were produced in 1973

and were just over two pounds or a kilogram in weight. Since then the technology has improved to such an extent that those produced today are tiny by comparison. In contrast with their very limited availability in the 1970's, today they are in use world-wide and nearly 90% of the world's population now have access to a cellphone.

Such changes have not brought the benefits that may have been envisaged by their inventors. The ability for men and women to communicate so easily and so quickly has not eliminated the misunderstandings that so often occur between individuals, families and different ethnic or religious groups. The nations of the world are as far away from living in harmony as they ever were, as evidenced by the present turmoil in the Middle East. This continues to exercise the minds of the world's politicians who search in

vain for a solution to the problems which threaten the stability of this volatile region and the whole world.

The Bible provides the only solution to this great dilemma – divine intervention! We believe that world-shaking events are soon to occur which will result in great changes and remove all the misunderstanding, mistrust and hatred that exist in these troubled times. Jesus Christ is the divinely appointed ruler of the new world order. This is a constantly recurring theme throughout the Bible and the time for this incredible change is set in the divine calendar:

‘... he (God) has appointed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by the man (Jesus) whom he has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all, by raising him from the dead.’

(Acts 17.31)

Change is something that we are all faced with for we are governed by an unalterable law that limits our sojourn on this planet to a relatively short period of time. The Bible describes our mortality in this way: *‘The days of our lives are seventy years; and if by reason of strength they are eighty years, yet their boast is only labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and*

we fly away’ (Psalm 90.10). With modern advancements in medicine and medical care, many can expect to live longer than this but this doesn’t alter the inevitable consequences of our mortality.

But the Bible does not leave us without hope for the future. It offers us a hope of unending life through the work of Jesus Christ, who lived and died and rose again from the dead. He is described by Paul in the New Testament as the *‘first-fruits’* of a new creation (I Corinthians 15.23) and for those who are his true followers (see article on page 21) there is a wonderful prospect of being raised from the dead, to share the life that he now enjoys.

This is the change that all true Christians look forward to – resurrection from the dead and a place in the coming kingdom of God on earth. The Apostle Paul had this to say to the first century Christians who eagerly waited for the return of Jesus: *‘(He) will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to his glorious body...’* (Philippians 3.21).

Will you be ready for this time of great change?



THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE FIRST CENTURY CHURCH

Part 8: The Ecclesia at Antioch

The apostles of Jesus continue their mission, as those ‘sent’, to preach the Gospel of the kingdom of God. Jesus had said to them: ‘and you shall be witnesses to me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth’ (Acts 1.8).

The word ‘apostle’ is derived from the Greek word ‘apostolos’ and means ‘one sent forth’. The apostles, supported by many disciples of Jesus, went out with great enthusiasm to tell others of the hope of the Gospel. It was a mission not without risk to themselves but Jesus had warned them of this:

‘...they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will

be brought before kings and rulers for my name’s sake. But it will turn out for you as an occasion for testimony’ (Luke 21.12,13).

As we continue in our study of the development of the early church, we see these men at work, now at a place called **Antioch**. There were at least two locations with this name within the Roman Empire (both now in Turkey). The more renowned was Syrian Antioch (now called Antakya - see map overleaf), situated on the Orontes River, a city founded towards the end of the fourth century BC by one of Alexander the Great’s generals named Seleucus 1 Nicator. The inhabitants of Antioch were of mixed origin, both Jews and Gentiles being there. Josephus, the celebrated Jewish historian, records that the Seleucids encouraged the Jews to emigrate there in large numbers and it was to such a



varied population that the Gospel was preached. The other Antioch was in the Roman province of Pisidia, a city visited later by the Apostle Paul during his first missionary journey (see Acts 13.14).

It is quite clear from the record in the book of Acts that a church or more correctly an 'ecclesia' (literally meaning an assembly of called out ones), had been established at Antioch in Syria as a result of the spread of the Gospel message. The events recorded in chapter 11 begin with the account of Peter telling the elders of the Jerusalem ecclesia how his eyes had been opened to

understand the 'calling out' of the Gentiles.

This had been seen in the conversion of the Roman soldier Cornelius with all his family (see article in previous issue – Volume 23.3). It came as a matter of great rejoicing to realise how the hope of eternal life had been extended to all those who believed in Jesus and were baptized. After listening to Peter's account of the conversion of Cornelius, they acknowledged that 'God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life' (Acts 11.18).

The gospel spreads through persecution

This information is important to note, because the affairs at Antioch to the north of the Holy Land in Syria are referred to in Acts chapter 11 in these words:

‘Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but the Jews only. But some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord’ (Acts 11. 19-21).

This is an example of the way in which the Gospel news spread, not only to Jews but also to non-Jews. ‘Hellenists’ is another name for those who spoke Greek and would include Jews and Greeks (Gentiles). The Greeks were among those who colonised this ancient and very busy city with its adjacent port. Persecution and the scattering of the disciples of Jesus proved to be the vehicle by which the true Gospel of the Kingdom was preached and accepted joyfully, by both Jews and Gentiles and as noted in

the passage above ‘a great number believed’.

When this exciting news reached the ecclesia at Jerusalem, the elders there feeling great responsibility for the new converts, sent Barnabas, of whom we will learn more later in these studies. The account in Acts chapter 11 uses some very interesting phrases:

‘...they sent out Barnabas to go as far as Antioch. When he came and had seen **the grace of God**, he was glad, and encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord. For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord’ (Acts 11.22-24).

‘*The grace of God*’ is a phrase used in many places in the Bible and is sometimes misused. There is a belief that we can do little to achieve the hope of eternal life ourselves – it is all a matter of God’s grace towards us for it is argued that we have no righteousness of ourselves. While this is true, in that we are mortal creatures, being sinners in the sight of God, His ‘grace’ or divine favour is to be seen in the knowledge of the Gospel. He has offered us a wonderful hope of eternal life, if we strive to be righteous and godly ourselves. Paul later wrote to the Corinthians: ‘*I thank my God*

‘the grace of God...’

always concerning you for the grace of God which was given to you by Christ Jesus, that you were enriched in everything by him in all utterance and all knowledge' (1Corinthians 1.4,5). The knowledge we have of the Gospel message today is an example of *'the grace of God'*.

A lasting relationship

The passage in Acts chapter 11 has another phrase we should note, especially given the way in which loose morals crept in amongst the early ecclesias, leading to warnings about the need for chaste behaviour. Barnabas exhorted the new believers in Christ that they should *'continue with the Lord'* (verse 23). The word *'continue'* used here is translated from the Greek word *'prosmeno'* and literally means to remain in a place, with a person; figuratively to adhere to, persevere in, abide still, be with, or cleave to.

The phrase *'cleave to'* is similar to one used by Jesus himself when challenging the Pharisees about the concept behind the marriage of a man and a woman. In reply to their question about divorce he said:

*'...Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, And said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall **cleave to** his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh?*

Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder' (Matthew 19.4-6 KJV).

In this instance, Jesus used another Greek word *'proskollao'* which has the meaning of cleave or literally be glued together. This unique relationship of a believing husband and wife that cannot be annulled except by death, is used by the Apostle Paul to reflect the intimate association of the believer with the Lord Jesus Christ:

'Therefore my brethren, you also have become dead to the law through the body of Christ, that you may be married to another, even to him who was raised from the dead, that we should bear fruit to God' (Romans 7.4).

The word 'Christian' was first used at Antioch

Like Paul, Barnabas wanted the new converts to Christianity to cling on to their new faith, being so closely attached to the teaching and example of Jesus that it was in a spiritual sense a marriage – nothing should break that bond that had been made secure through belief and baptism into his saving name.

Barnabas then, either by instruction from Jerusalem or because of his great regard for the Apostle Paul, went to Tarsus to find Paul and having done so, we learn that he brought Paul to Antioch. Luke records in Acts the result of their co-operation in the work of strengthening the ecclesia at Antioch:

‘So it was that for a whole year they assembled with the church and taught a great many people. And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch’ (Acts 11.26).

‘Christian’ means being a follower of the teaching and example of Jesus Christ. Today the name Christian has lost its original impact – for in the first century AD it identified those who were the disciples of Jesus Christ. Now there are millions of people throughout the world who regard themselves as ‘Christians’ but the question has to be asked: ‘Do they really believe and teach the things which Jesus preached as the Gospel? Do they adhere to the doctrines on which the early church was founded?’

In our studies of the establishment of the early ‘church’, we shall come across many fundamental doctrines. These principles are set out clearly in the teaching of Jesus and the apostles, and it is important that we examine our beliefs in the light of this teaching. The names ‘Christian’ and Antioch take us back to the pure

source of Christian teaching which has become polluted by human ideas down the centuries so that what passes for Christianity today bears little resemblance to the beliefs and practices of the first century Christians.

Collections for those in need

It was a common feature of first century ecclesial life that collections were taken up to assist with the work of the ecclesia and for the care of those who were sick or in poverty. In Antioch, a prophet named Agabus, empowered by the Holy Spirit, warned of a famine. History confirms that the Roman Empire was affected by famine during the reign of the Emperor Claudius who, out of his private purse, gave to relieve suffering in Rome rather than in Antioch.

In order to alleviate the suffering of the believers, we note that relief was sent by the hands of Paul and Barnabas. Christian giving is a feature of life today and we are often called upon to give as generously as we can to help others. Jesus himself said that *‘it is more blessed to give than to receive’* (Acts 20.35) and we learn that the first century believers adopted the practice of taking up collections for those in need (see for example Paul’s words to the Corinthians – 1 Corinthians 16.1-3).



A time of persecution for the believers

In Acts chapter 12 we are given a glimpse of the rigours and suffering of those who were the followers of Jesus. The land of Palestine was managed for the Romans by procurators, among them the Herods who we read about in the New Testament. The Herod we have here is Herod Agrippa 1 of Judea who ruled for a short time (AD 41-44). He had a chequered career, to say the least! He was the son of Aristobulus, grandson of Herod the Great who sought to destroy the infant Jesus. He was brought up in Rome, where he fell heavily into debt and in AD 23 he had to leave Rome and stayed under the care of his uncle Antipas at Tiberias. He later offended the Emperor Tiberius and was imprisoned for a time, being released when Caligula came to power. He was given the title of 'king'

and allowed to rule for Rome over the territories of N. E. Palestine and therefore not far from Antioch.

Herod's persecution of the believers resulted in the death of James the brother of John. This was clearly done to take advantage of the dissension between Jews who believed the Gospel and those who opposed it. As we shall see throughout the record of the establishment of the early church, Paul and the other apostles had to contend earnestly for the faith in the face of persecution. Jesus had, of course warned his followers that they would suffer in this way:

'...for they will deliver you up to councils, and you will be beaten in the synagogues, And you will be brought before rulers and kings for my sake, for a testimony to them. And the gospel must first be preached to all the nations. But when they arrest you and deliver you up, do not worry beforehand, or premeditate what you will speak. But whatever is given you in that hour, speak that; for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. Now brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death. And you will be hated by all men for my name's sake. But he who endures to the end shall be saved' (Mark 13.9-13).

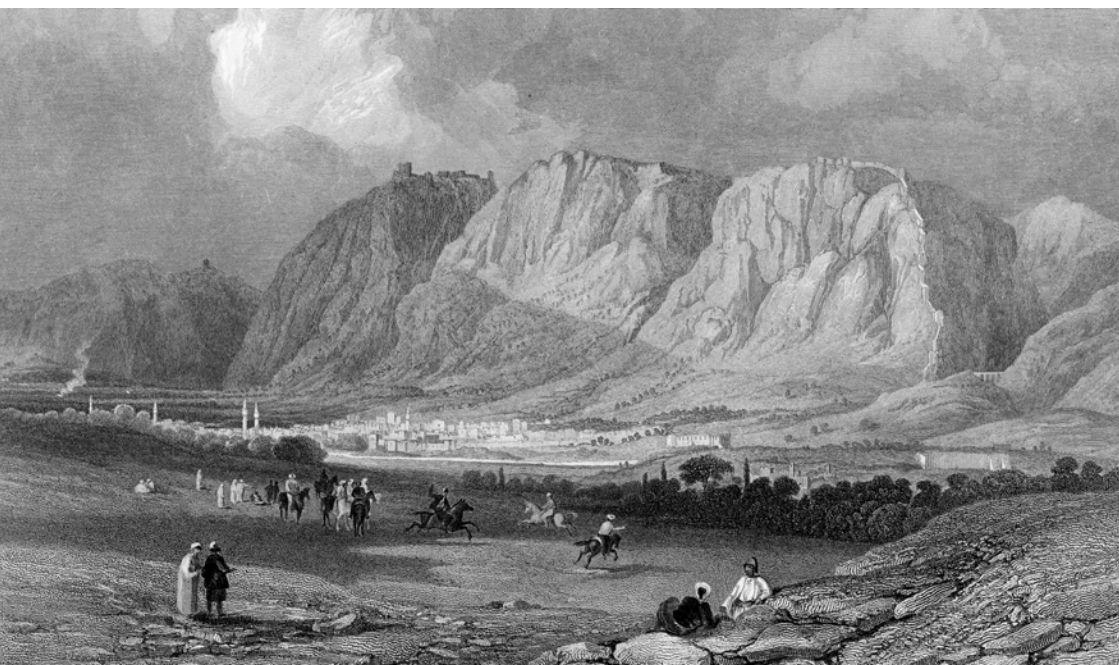
Peter in prison

So it was that the Apostle Peter was imprisoned and in Acts chapter 12 there is the delightful account of the way in which Peter was released from the prison by an angel and then had difficulty in getting access to the home of Mary the mother of John Mark. The locked door of the house is a reminder of the difficult times in which they lived, at any moment expecting trouble from the authorities. We need to remember that these men and women suffered great persecution for Christ's sake. There can be no better testimony to the truth of the Gospel and belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, than the fact that the early 'church' or ecclesia was established upon the conviction that he had risen from the dead. Peter himself had said:

'The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree. Him God has exalted to his right hand to be Prince and Saviour, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are his witnesses to these things, and so also is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him' (Acts 5.30-33).

Herod came to a 'sticky end' as we might say today. Failing to give God any glory, whilst he was being feted by the crowd, he was struck down with a severe illness and died in AD 44 at the age of 54. These events are again confirmed by the historian Josephus (*Antiquities of the Jews*

Antioch in Syria – engraving by William Miller 1866



19.343 ff). Acts chapter 13 begins with another little glimpse of life in the ecclesia at Antioch in Syria, around AD 45:

‘Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, “Now separate for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away’ (Acts 13.1-3).

Lessons for today

Prophets, teachers and the effects of the Holy Spirit speaking through such men, fasting and prayer were all the hallmarks of the true church (ecclesia) of Christ. Today, although the gifts of the Spirit have been withdrawn, we have the Spirit Word of God, the complete testimony of Scripture as our guide which is no less powerful in the lives of believers. Fasting may well be appropriate as it was in the first century AD. Certainly the denial of self is an essential element of being a true disciple of Jesus and prayer is a real source of comfort. This is what we can learn as we study and re-live with the apostles the early days of the followers of Christ nearly 2,000 years ago.



First century stone relief of a Phoenician ship. This is the type of ship used by the apostles on their missionary journeys

To explore the subject of the gifts of the Spirit in more detail, please send for the new Dawn Booklet 'The Holy Spirit' – see address inside back cover

Next article in this series:

Part 9: Paul's first missionary journey



from our Mail Bag

A reader in Africa has enquired about the relationship between Adam and Eve before their transgression in the Garden of Eden. Was the woman first given rule or authority over the man, as after the fall part of her punishment was to accept that the man would rule over her?

This question arises out of the events which took place in the Garden of Eden some 6,000 years ago, events which have had such a profound impact on human beings since that time. It concerns the persuasive lead taken by Eve in the Garden of Eden and the subsequent punishment given to her and all future generations of women.

The book of Genesis leaves us in no doubt that God created Adam as the first human being and that he was made from the dust of the ground. God gave him the breath of life and then we read that *'the LORD God said, "It is not good that man should be*

alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him"' (Genesis 2.18). The original Hebrew in which this was written conveys the idea of a female counterpart of Adam, so that as one writer put it: 'together they made one whole or complete unit, each being designed to bring out the best in the other and by mutual co-operation to reflect a way of life that would be to the glory of their Creator'.

Eve's creation

In order to bring this about, God took one of Adam's ribs and made the woman from him as Adam recognised when he said: *'This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man'* (Genesis 2.23). By inference therefore, Eve was created from Adam as *'a helper comparable'* to Adam and not made to have control of, or to be the head over man.

Marriage divinely arranged

The next verse tells us that it was God's intention that a man and woman would become *'one flesh'*. In this context we can consider that love, mutual respect and companionship also play a part. This emphasises that marriage was a divine arrangement from the very beginning, and is endorsed by Jesus with the words: *'Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate'* (Mark 10.9).

It is also a fitting symbol for that perfect union between Christ and his bride that will take place at his second coming as described in the last book of the Bible (Revelation 19.6-9).

The serpent's deception

The record in Genesis tells us that Eve was tempted to disobey God first and then persuaded Adam to follow her lead (Genesis 3.1-6). This does not imply that she had some control over Adam but that through the subtle reasoning of the serpent she had taken the fruit from the prohibited tree and then influenced Adam to do likewise. This is commented on by Paul in writing to Timothy: *'...Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived fell into transgression'* (1 Timothy 2.14).

Paul also reminded Timothy that Adam was formed first then Eve (1 Timothy 2.13). Again this emphasises that the

woman was created as a suitable helper for the man. This is the argument put forward by Paul to the believers in Corinth, when explaining why women should cover their heads when engaging in acts of worship with men present: *'...I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God'* (1 Corinthians 11.3).

So we see that throughout the Bible, from his creation onwards, Adam is shown as being *'the head'* and this position did not change as a result of the transgression in Eden. The change that did take place from this point on was that the curses on the first human pair changed their status from being in a state described as *'very good'* to being subject to sin and death.

The sentence on Adam

God said:

'...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 sentence on Eve

God said:

‘I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; in pain you shall bring forth children; your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you’ (Genesis 3.16).

Over the years and in many different cultures men have taken this idea of ruling over women to a greater level than was originally intended, feeling that as the head of the house, every demand and request should be obeyed without question. All too often women have been treated as second class citizens and such behaviour still exists in some cultures today.

The male and female bond

The position of a man and woman must be recognised in relation to our standing in the sight of God and his son Jesus Christ. As Paul taught the Corinthians, it flows over into the way in which we worship God. At the same time it is acknowledged in a loving and caring relationship between a man and his wife, as seen in God’s characteristics in dealing with those who in turn love Him.

This dual responsibility is highlighted in Paul’s letter to the believers in first century Ephesus. We recommend that this passage is read carefully as the point is being made that the man should love his wife as his own body

and if she is treated right then she will automatically wish to submit to him and respect him (Ephesians 5.22-33).

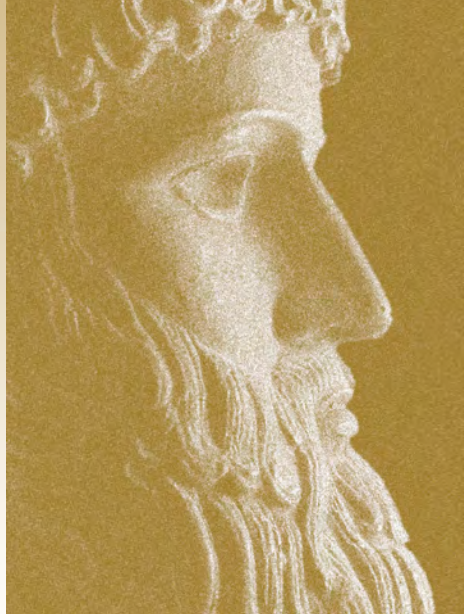
Paul again makes this clear when writing to the first century Christians in Galatia (a Roman province now in Turkey).

‘For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus’ (Galatians 3.26-28).

Adam’s error, prompted by Eve, in not obeying God’s command, introduced death for all men and women. However Paul goes on to say that through the obedience of one man Jesus Christ, we can have life and participate in the promises given to Abraham the father of the Jewish race, whether we are Jews or not.

‘If you are Christ’s then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise’ (Galatians 3.29).

This ‘promise’ will be fulfilled in the establishment of God’s kingdom on earth and the prospect for those who ‘are Christ’s’ is to live in it for eternity whether male or female.



BIBLE CHARACTERS

King Hezekiah

Seven hundred years before Christ, great political changes were taking shape in the world centred in the Middle East. Power struggles were taking place between the larger nations in an attempt to dominate the ancient world. The three key players were Assyria, Babylon and Egypt.

The smaller nations became the pawns of the major powers, often serving as 'buffer zones' fought over and conquered by empire builders. This was the changing world in which Hezekiah became king of Judah, the southernmost area of the divided Jewish kingdom. War loomed on the horizon.

The internal world of the Jews was also changing. The reality was that it rarely enjoyed prolonged stability. The reason for this was religious. The Jews would worship the true God for a time but then leave Him for a false divinity, with serious consequences. When Hezekiah became king of Judah, the northern kingdom of Israel was approaching its end for this very reason. Less than a quarter of Hezekiah's reign had passed, before the northern kingdom fell to Assyria. This event served as a sober warning to Judah which, for about 130 years, once more became the sole centre of Jewish identity and a bastion against the world.

An excellent character

The outstanding feature of Hezekiah was the excellence of his character. Few of the twenty or so Jewish kings

who reigned in Jerusalem rank as highly as Hezekiah, whose dedication to the service of God can be compared with the great David, king of the undivided land. In certain respects, the young king Josiah might also be compared with Hezekiah, although Josiah did not demonstrate the same degree of faith in times of crisis. The Scriptural assessment of Hezekiah is clear:

‘He trusted in the LORD God of Israel, so that after him was none like him among all the kings of Judah, nor any who were before him. For he held fast to the LORD; he did not depart from following him, but kept his commandments...’ (2 Kings 18.5,6)

What made this trust in God all the more remarkable was the fact that his father Ahaz was one of the most wicked kings the nation ever knew. Hezekiah understood that the key to a righteous life was service to God. This is clear from a prayer he uttered when the feast of Passover was kept. The celebrations commenced soon after the religious reformation began although without the full preparation prescribed by the Law of Moses. Hezekiah said: ‘...*May the good LORD provide atonement (KJV pardon) for every one who prepares his heart to seek God...*’ (2 Chronicles 30.18,19). Preparation is essential for all who seek to please God.

Not only did Hezekiah do what was right in the sight of God, it is apparent that the people of Judah respected and trusted him. This may be seen by the way the people stood by him through the deepest crisis, despite attempts by the enemies of the country to weaken their trust. Another illustration is apparent in the wholehearted manner in which the people worked with Hezekiah to reform the country, as they did to rejoice in victory. Rarely did people bring presents to their kings as freely as they did to Hezekiah at that time (see 2 Chronicles 32.23).

Hezekiah as a reformer

It may well be true that Hezekiah gained some experience of ruling during the latter years of the reign of his father Ahaz. However, the first thing the 25 year old Hezekiah did when he succeeded his evil father, was to reform the nation’s worship. One can detect the urgency of the situation: ‘*In the first year of his reign, in the first month, he opened the doors of the house of the LORD and repaired them*’ (2 Chronicles 29.3):

Clearly, Hezekiah had set his priorities in a most commendable manner – a lesson and an example for all time. There was no waiting in the interests of political expediency. In contrast, more than three hundred years earlier, Solomon’s work of building the temple was not commenced until four years after he

became king. Two other kings, Joash and Josiah, were also religious reformers but without the immediacy of Hezekiah. This comparison may not, however, be entirely fair because these kings were even younger than Hezekiah when they ascended the throne. Hezekiah carried the programme through with urgency because he knew that the country had suffered as a result of wickedness and he feared that further punishment would follow.

This religious reform was carried out to achieve a revival in the worship of Yahweh so sadly neglected by Ahaz and the nation. Rarely had a king of God's nation sunk to such a low state, treating everything to do with the worship of God with spite. In contrast, Hezekiah, with unbounded energy, led one of the most thorough and comprehensive attempts at revival ever undertaken by man. It included the following features:

- ❖ The temple was restored and sanctified
- ❖ The priesthood was re-established and sanctified
- ❖ Sacrifices were offered regularly
- ❖ A new covenant was made with God

A modern representation of the brazen serpent by artist Giovanni Fantoni on Mt. Nebo in present-day Jordan

- ❖ The Passover feast was held
- ❖ False worship was forbidden and its altars and images destroyed

The extent of the measures judged necessary for religious revival show how far the nation had gone away from God and from the system of worship set in place by Solomon. False religion was everywhere in evidence until Hezekiah removed it. Whereas most earlier attempts to do this were evidently incomplete, Hezekiah sought to eliminate anything which took his people away from God.

An interesting example of this was the brazen serpent made by Moses almost nine hundred years earlier during the wilderness journey for a specific purpose (Numbers 21.9). Even though this had been made at the command



Part of the two thousand year old second scroll of Isaiah found in the Dead Sea caves. Isaiah is an important source of information about Hezekiah, and the scrolls confirm how accurately the text has been transmitted to us

of God, it had to be destroyed because it had become an object for idol worship. Hezekiah did not limit his reformation to the two tribes he ruled. The ten tribes of the northern kingdom of Israel, then moving inexorably towards terminal decline, were also appealed to with a measure of success.

The feast of Passover was kept with great enthusiasm by Hezekiah and the people of Judah and Israel. This is apparent from the number of offerings. The length of the feast was doubled from one week to two. It was a time of great joy and it is a reminder that great joy is a part of true worship.

The policy of Hezekiah was to reinstate the worship of God as laid down in the law of God. He clearly was very aware of the Word of God, as it then existed. He contributed to the Bible we know today by collating a section of the proverbs of Solomon (Proverbs 25.1). Hezekiah was also a poet and one of his compositions has been preserved in the book of Isaiah (Isaiah 38.9-20). This memorable work was inspired by his recovery from a serious illness.



The prophet Isaiah was an important source of encouragement and help in all his work for God. No doubt, the prophet's advice was greatly valued by the king. All of Isaiah's prophecies would almost certainly have been familiar to Hezekiah and, in view of the apparent long term uncertainty of events, it was a great privilege to know of the future salvation of Israel. Hezekiah was given many other privileges, among them great wealth (2 Chronicles 32.27-29).

A time of crisis

Hezekiah was a good king with whom God was pleased. As with all servants of God however, he was not spared crisis and a time of testing. In view of

the political developments referred to earlier, it was inevitable that the nation should be the subject of aggression. Prosperity no doubt made this potential prize all the more attractive to the Assyrian king Sennacherib who, around 700BC, attacked the kingdom of Judah. One of the reasons for this attack was that Hezekiah had declined to serve the Assyrian king by ceasing payment of tribute (2 Kings 18.7). He did this at a time of military success after he had defeated the Philistines. In all of this he demonstrated full trust in God, knowing as he did, the power of Assyria and the way in which she was advancing across the Middle East. He

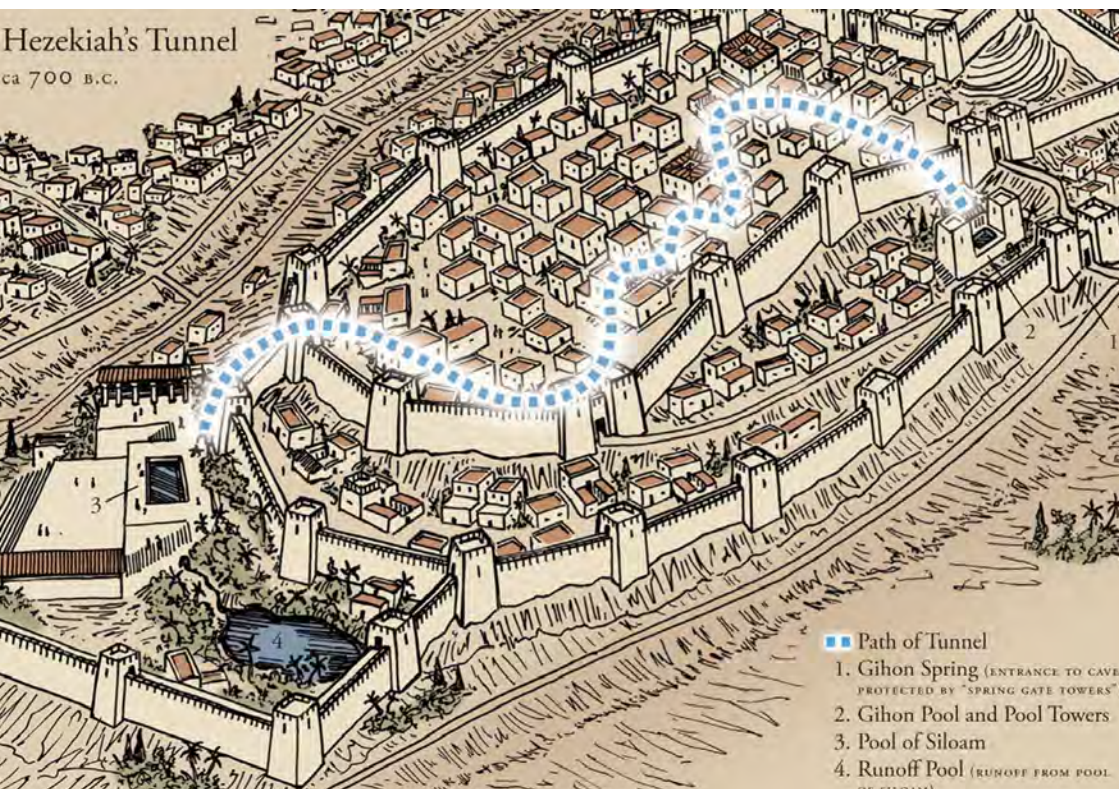
did not lose this trust when Assyria entered the country and began to attack key cities in preparation for the greatest prize of all – Jerusalem.

Although he tried to negotiate with Sennacherib, Hezekiah made sensible preparations for the defence of the city. It is of special note that he constructed a tunnel to carry water into the city in order to prevent the invaders having the use of this vital commodity whilst preserving it for Jerusalem.

This tunnel is 1,777 feet (542 metres) in length and stretches from the spring of Gihon on the east of the city to the Pool of Siloam within the southern

Hezekiah's Tunnel

ca 700 B.C.



■ ■ Path of Tunnel

1. Gihon Spring (ENTRANCE TO CAVE PROTECTED BY "SPRING GATE TOWERS")
2. Gihon Pool and Pool Towers
3. Pool of Siloam
4. Runoff Pool (RUNOFF FROM POOL OF SILOAM)

part of Jerusalem. Not only did this feat of engineering help the defenders when the Assyrians besieged the city, it also made life difficult for later attackers. The Crusaders, almost 2,000 years later, suffered as a result of Hezekiah's prudent work. Of particular interest was the discovery in 1880 of an inscription in the tunnel, recording the completion of the work and confirming the truth of the record in Scripture (2 Kings 20.20).

The poet Byron depicted the attack on Jerusalem in a well-known verse: 'The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold' ('The destruction of Sennacherib', Lord Byron). This siege by Sennacherib was the occasion of events unique within Scripture. First, it is distinguished for what was one of the worst recorded blasphemies, in letters and speeches. Sennacherib and his general Rab-shakeh seriously challenged the power of God and tried to weaken the resolve of the people of Jerusalem. Hezekiah and the prophet Isaiah jointly took the wisest action by imploring God's help – as all in trouble should. In response, God addressed Sennacherib in these words:

**'Whom have you reproached
and blasphemed? Against whom
have you raised your voice, and
lifted up your eyes on high?
Against the Holy One of Israel'**

(2 Kings 19.22)

On occasions, God has acted decisively and directly as He did against Assyria in this most devastating destruction of an army in which 185,000 Assyrian soldiers died instantly (2 Kings 19.35). Such is the power of God in whose hands is the life of every breathing thing. What forces are available to protect those who trust in God!

Other events in Hezekiah's life

Two further events are recorded from the life of Hezekiah. In one of these he suffered a serious illness during which Isaiah paid a visit to tell him that he would die. Once more, Hezekiah placed himself before God in prayer, pleading for mercy and a cure. God not only gave him this but extended his life by fifteen years. It is rare within the Bible to find instances where God has effected a cure directly; most other such miracles were performed through others. It was also remarkable for the sign given to Hezekiah whereby the shadow on the sundial moved back to confirm that God was working a miracle.

Following his recovery, the Babylonians, who were pleased that Hezekiah had not been defeated by the common enemy Assyria, came to offer their congratulations. Here we find Hezekiah at his weakest. Instead of simply utilising the opportunity to tell his friends about the cure and

protection he had received from God, he allowed his pride to be uppermost in showing off the greatness and wealth he had achieved. However, Hezekiah accepted the rebuke of God and acknowledged His justice.

Hezekiah's life - a message for today

An examination of the life and work of Hezekiah provides further evidence of the truth of the Bible. We also learn about God's just dealings with men both good and bad. There are two aspects of particular relevance to our day. The personal message of Hezekiah's life is valuable – trust in God! Do this during your darkest hours as well as when times are good. Remember that it was the preparation during the good times which helped Hezekiah when he most needed God.

The events of Hezekiah's life also tell us how God is able to work in human affairs. Above all, we learn that God can deliver – the more so when His purpose with man is in jeopardy. In particular, Bible prophecies indicate that events will happen in Israel which will exhibit a similarity with the Assyrian attack. Even more important is the promise of greater protection for God's people than Hezekiah enjoyed. One feature of the protection of Israel long ago was that a measure of national repentance preceded the intervention of God. It is no coincid-

ence that the prophet Zechariah foresaw a future deliverance of Israel following repentance and the acknowledgement of Jesus:

'In that day the LORD will defend the inhabitants of Jerusalem...I will seek to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem. And I will pour on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem the Spirit of grace and supplication; then they will look on me whom they have pierced; they will mourn for him as one mourns for his only son...' (Zechariah 12.8-10).

We believe that time will be soon – you can be among those who will prepare for that time when Jesus comes to deliver Israel and set up God's kingdom on earth.

For more information about the Dead Sea Scrolls (see page 17) write for free special issue entitled 'Light on the Dead Sea Scrolls'



BIBLE TEACHING ABOUT...

The Christian way of life

What is ‘The Christian way of life?’ In answering this question many people would say – ‘doing good’.

This may comprise a list of attributes or activities which we would regard as ‘Christian’ – showing love or compassion, doing voluntary or charitable work and being a good neighbour.

The list can be magnified many times over and would comprise many things normally regarded as ‘Christian’ activities, although many of them may equally be said to be deeds advocated by others who are not necessarily ‘Christians’ themselves.

At the outset it is important to note that doing good to others and being a

Christian are not one and the same thing, although good works are indeed part of being a Christian, and intimately connected with the Christian life. The parable of ‘The Good Samaritan’ is an example of doing good to others (see Luke 10.25-37).

The example of Jesus

We could, of course, have no better teaching about real Christianity than looking at the example of Jesus himself. He is the pattern and his teachings also give us the necessary guidance to become a Christian. Living as a Christian is not of any lasting good without being a follower of Jesus in the first place and we shall see what this means as we look more deeply into what it means to be a Christian. We see Jesus’ life as being the greatest example on which to model our lives. Indeed Jesus asks us

to follow him and his example, just as he asked his first century disciples.

We do not know much about the early life of Jesus but we know that from an early age he was well versed in the Old Testament Scriptures (the New Testament was not yet written). At the age of twelve, Mary and Joseph found him in the temple in Jerusalem with the religious rulers, listening to them and asking them questions. It is recorded that *'all who heard him were astonished at his understanding and his answers'* (Luke 2.47). Following this incident he travelled back with his parents from Jerusalem to Nazareth and we are told that he *'was obedient to them'* (Luke 2.51 NIV). He demonstrated at an early age those characteristics that are so pleasing to God.

The importance of baptism

His public ministry began at around the age of 30 and the first recorded incident was that of his baptism by John in the river Jordan. John questioned the need for Jesus to be baptized but Jesus answered John: *'Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness'* (Matthew 3.15). Baptism was necessary for Jesus and is a requirement for all who wish to follow him. Jesus told his disciples to *'Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned'* (Mark 16.15,16 NIV). We cannot become a true Christian without baptism by a full immersion in water following belief of the gospel and recognition of the need for repentance from past sins.



The Madaba Map, a unique floor mosaic dating from around 570 AD, includes the site on the River Jordan where John baptized (also see front cover)

The teaching of Jesus

After his baptism Jesus spent some time alone in fasting and underwent a series of temptations in preparation for his ministry. He was able to counter these temptations with the words of Scripture – ***‘It is written’*** (see Matthew 4.1-11). This is a principle that applies to every true Christian. Whatever we may desire or think has to be tested by what God requires as revealed in the Scriptures. A life in harmony with the divine principles set out in God’s Word is the basis of the Christian way of life.

From that time on, Jesus preached the gospel (the good news) of the coming kingdom of God. The miracles he performed were signs of his authority as the Son of God. They also demonstrated his compassion for his fellow men and women. He then spent over three years going from place to place preaching the gospel and performing great miraculous signs, in order that men and women would follow him and believe the gospel. Matthew tells us that *‘Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease among the people’* (Matthew 4.23).

Not many obeyed the call of Jesus but a few men and women did so. The rest made excuses, as men and women do today. The majority carried

on with their lives and ignored Jesus’ message and his call to believe the gospel and enter the race for everlasting life. This kind of person is not a true Christian, and Jesus in his teaching warned that most people would follow the broad way which leads to destruction, rather than the narrow way that leads to life. It was not enough just to accept Jesus, having heard his teaching, but to do the will of God. Jesus said: *‘Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father in heaven’* (Matthew 7.21).

He followed this saying by telling a parable about two men – one wise and one foolish. The wise man built his house on a rock and the foolish man built his house on the sand (Matthew 7.24,27). The lesson was about hearing the sayings of Jesus and acting upon them – a powerful lesson for those who want to be Christians today!

Jesus gave personal instructions to those who did follow him. The Sermon on the Mount, the parables and the preaching of the coming kingdom of God helped those who heard him to prepare themselves for that future day when Jesus will sit on the throne of David in Jerusalem as God’s chosen king. The last book of the Bible looks forward to that time when *‘The kingdoms of this world have become*

An early hand-tinted photo of fishermen on Lake Tiberias (the Sea of Galilee). Jesus invited his first disciples to leave their boats and become 'fishers of men'



the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever!' (Revelation 11.15). This is the kingdom which Jesus taught his disciples to pray for. The present life would be a stepping-stone to that kingdom as they were to remember and follow all that Jesus had commanded them. On one occasion he was asked *'which is the first commandment of all'* The answer of Jesus provides the key to the Christian way of life:

'...you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. This is the first commandment. And the second, like it, is this: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'. There is no other commandment greater than these' (Mark 12.30,31).

The example of the twelve

Jesus called a number of ordinary men and women to follow him, among whom were the twelve disciples. These men saw Jesus and heard his words, and they followed him. To follow Jesus was for them a difficult task in that it meant leaving their old way of life, their occupations and their families and to be the constant companions of Jesus during his ministry. They had no doubt this was what they should do as shown by the example of Peter and Andrew. Matthew tells us that *'Jesus, walking by the Sea of Galilee, saw two brothers, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men". Then they immediately left their nets and followed him'* (Matthew 4.18-20).

From that time onwards their lives changed radically and they became his constant companions, observing his teachings and witnessing his miracles. They were convinced that he was the descendant promised to David, and that he would reign on David's throne in Jerusalem as expressed in the words of the angel Gabriel to his mother Mary before he was born (Luke 1.32). This was part of the gospel message that Jesus preached and when Peter said to him: *'See, we have left all and followed you...what shall we have?'* Jesus promised them that they would reign with him in his coming kingdom (Matthew 19.27, 28).

After Jesus' death and resurrection they were commanded to continue his work of preaching the gospel message and to baptize those who believed. As apostles they were sent out to preach the good news of God's coming kingdom and show the way for men and women to begin a new life as Christians.

The example of the first century Christians

The early chapters of Acts record how that through the apostles' ministry the gospel spread rapidly, starting at Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. After hearing Peter speak about the resurrection from the dead and what this meant, it is recorded that *'those*

who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them' (Acts 2.41).

The people who heard Peter's message realized for the first time that their leaders had been wrong in putting Jesus to death. They were filled with remorse as they now understood that salvation from death was only possible through him. They expressed true repentance for their past sins and a determination to follow Jesus, having first come to an understanding of the gospel message spoken by Peter. Then they demonstrated their repentance by requesting baptism – a symbolic washing away of past sins by complete immersion in water.

It is then recorded that *'they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers'* (Acts 2.42). Their example is the pattern for all who would live a Christian way of life and can be summarised as follows:

Belief and baptism – essential for salvation: *'he who believes and is baptized will be saved'* (Mark 16.16).

Remaining steadfast in the apostles' doctrine based on the teaching of Jesus – not the ideas of men. Do you believe what the first century Christians believed?

Fellowship by baptism into Christ, becoming his brothers and sisters and heirs together of the hope of everlasting life.

Breaking of bread customarily on the first day of the week (our Sunday). True Christians must remember Jesus in sharing bread and wine regularly as he commanded: *‘Do this in remembrance of me’* (Luke 22.19).

Prayer: they could now truly pray to their Heavenly Father, with Jesus as their mediator; prayer is a vital part of a Christian’s way of life.

The example of Cornelius

Cornelius was a Roman centurion, and we read in the book of Acts that he was ‘a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always’ (Acts 10.2). On the surface it appeared that he displayed all the qualities of a true Christian.

But this was not so, for God sent the Apostle Peter to Cornelius to convert him. The chapter tells us that Peter received a vision of unclean beasts, which he was told to kill and to eat, and this troubled him being a Jew. Being perplexed about this, he immediately received a delegation from Cornelius, who himself had received a vision from God telling him



to send men to Peter, and to listen to what he had to say.

Peter was made to realise through the vision he had, that the gospel would be preached to both Jews and Gentiles, as he later said to Cornelius: *‘...God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean’* (Acts 10.28). And so Peter went to the house where Cornelius had assembled his relatives and friends to listen to his teaching. He preached Jesus and his mission to all those who were there, saying *‘In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears him and works righteousness is accepted by him’* (Acts 10.34, 35). While Peter was speaking, the Holy Spirit came upon

his hearers confirming the message, and he commanded them to be baptized (Acts 10.47,48).

We notice that although Cornelius was devout, although he feared God and was generous to others, although he was a man of prayer – something was lacking. Belief and baptism are essential requisites, as we have already seen. Cornelius was baptized into Christ and his life took a new direction from that moment on.

Paul on the road to Damascus - detail from a painting by Caravaggio

The example of the Apostle Paul

Of all of the apostles, Paul is perhaps the greatest example of a man whose life changed dramatically after he became a Christian. Paul is introduced to us as Saul of Tarsus, who was trained as a Pharisee, a member of a Jewish sect that was in constant conflict with Jesus and who helped to bring about his trial and crucifixion.

The book of Acts tells us about Saul's persecution of the Christians, but on the way to Damascus to arrest some of the believers something happened that completely changed his life. Suddenly a bright light shone from



heaven and he fell to the ground. He heard a voice saying '*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?*' (Acts 9.4). It was the voice of Jesus, now risen from the dead, whom he was persecuting. Saul's conversion followed and through the disciple Ananias, he was baptized in Damascus. Later his name was changed to Paul.

After Paul's conversion and baptism, he immediately gave up his previous life as a Pharisee and joined himself to the believers. He then travelled throughout the Roman world, preaching the gospel and helping his fellow Christians in their life of dedication to the service of their Master. Instead of being a persecutor, like them he suffered much persecution as he carried out his work of preaching to the Gentiles.

Paul wrote a number of letters to his fellow Christians, and in these he confirmed the teaching of Jesus about the true Christian way of life and his own example of a man who had given up everything for the service of his Master. His appeal to the Christians at Corinth is no less relevant today: '*Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ*' (I Corinthians 11.1). He said openly that he counted everything he used to possess as rubbish, except the gospel, and he had been prepared to suffer the loss of all things. Truly he was a model example of the Christian way of life.

Concluding thoughts

The Christian way of life is not easy – it never was. Jesus and the first century Christians show us that the road to God's kingdom is a narrow way '*and there are few who find it*' (Matthew 7.14). Most people choose to follow '*the broad way*', which leads to destruction, for this is what happens at the end of their wasted mortal life – this is the end of the road for the majority. But true Christianity is the only way that leads to life. The Apostle Peter said of Jesus: '*Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved*' (Acts 4.12).

All who wish to become followers of Christ must ask the questions: Am I a Christian in the fullest sense? Am I willing to make the commitment to Christ that he requires of his true followers?

Send for a free booklet entitled 'The Commandments of Christ' which lists in a simple format the teaching of Jesus and his apostles as set out in the New Testament. As the preface of this pocket-sized booklet says: 'Before we can keep his commandments, we must know them, and in order to know them we must remember them'.



Signs in our Times

What are the ‘signs in our times’? Why should we study the ‘signs’? The intention of this article is to examine these questions and answer them from the Bible.

When it comes to Bible study, the closely connected themes of prophecy and history are of particular interest. In fact, one fulfilled prophecy – the return of the Jews to their ancient homeland and the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, is one of two major themes in the Bible that powerfully confirms my conviction that it is true. The other is the consistency within this collection of writings by many people living in different countries over a period of some 1,500 years. This simply would not be possible without divine inspiration, as the Apostle Peter put it:

‘...prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit’ (2 Peter 1.21).

A little research using the internet search engine ‘Google’, asking the question ‘How many prophecies are there in the Bible?’ gives a variety of answers. One suggestion which seems reasonable is that there are about 2,500, with 500 prophecies yet to be fulfilled. With so many prophecies fulfilled we can be confident that those remaining will also come true.

So what are ‘signs in our times?’ It's an expression commonly used by Christadelphians, who are expecting the return of Jesus to align events happening in our times with Bible prophecy. ‘Our times’ can mean now, in the immediate future and the relatively recent past. The alignment

with prophecy may be very direct; for example the creation of the Jewish State in 1948 confirmed many Bible prophecies about the return of the Jews to their land. It can also include a pattern of events that we expect from an understanding of a number of prophecies, for example an interpretation of *'the time of the end'* referred to by the prophet Daniel, where a power described as *'the king of the North'* will invade the land of Israel and surrounding countries (see Daniel 11.40-45).

The need to be watchful

Why do we watch the signs? One very good reason is that Jesus told us to! He said to his disciples: *'And what I say to you, I say to all: Watch!'* (Mark 13.37). The word *'watch'* means more than just looking. The context of Jesus' words relates to a series of prophecies in answer to the disciples' question near the start of this chapter. My Bible heads these verses *'The Signs of the Times and the End of the Age'*.

'Now as he sat on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, "Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign when all these things will be fulfilled?"' (Mark 13.3,4)

In the past people have used the signs in their times to understand and anticipate events current to them. A

good example of this is the prophet Daniel. He anticipated the return of the Jews to their homeland after 70 years of captivity in Babylon, by being aware of the signs in his times. He knew from reading what Jeremiah had written years before, that the time was near.

'...I, Daniel, understood by the books the number of the years specified by the word of the LORD, given through Jeremiah the prophet, that he would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem' (Daniel 9.2).

The relevant passage that Daniel read is found in Jeremiah's prophecy :

'For thus says the LORD: After seventy years are completed at Babylon, I will visit you and perform my good word towards you, and cause you to return to this place' (Jeremiah 29.10).

It is interesting to note that what to Daniel was a sign in his times is today an example of fulfilled prophecy!

RIGHT: In a dream the king of Babylon saw a huge multi-metal statue toppled by a small stone that struck it on the feet

Nebuchadnezzar's dream

Daniel recorded for us a really easy way to understand history and prophecy from his time right through to the setting up of the kingdom of God. Does the picture remind you of anything that happened in Daniel's life? You need to read **Daniel chapter 2** for the full story.

Here is a summary:

Nebuchadnezzar was the king of Babylon. God used him to punish the Jews by destroying Jerusalem and carrying them away captive. Some time after this, God caused him to have a dream. He summoned all his advisers and asked them to explain the dream to him. He was an astute man and would not tell them what the dream was, because he did not trust them. He probably thought they would make up an explanation of the dream if he let them know what it was. Instead he insisted that they tell him both the content of the dream and what it meant – which was impossible from a human point of view. Of course, they couldn't do this – but Daniel did, aided by the power of God.



What did the dream mean?

Daniel's interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream told the king that there would be another three 'world' empires after him – the Medes and Persians, the Greeks and finally the Romans. 'World' is in inverted commas because it doesn't mean the whole world as we know it today. It refers to the then civilised world, which was centred on what is now called the Middle East. The 'world' had its fullest extent under the Romans who ruled much of present day Europe as well as parts of the Middle East including the land then known as Palestine (now called Israel).

Strong and weak nations

After the Roman Empire came to an end about 400 years after Christ, the area represented by the feet of the image was ruled by a number of kings some of whom were strong and some weak, depicted as feet of iron mixed with clay. This symbolized that these nations would never again be united just as iron and clay do not stick together in the physical sense. The strong and weak nations that followed the break-up of the Roman Empire have continued down to the present day. Despite the efforts of leaders to unite Europe further, the nations of Europe are still very much divided with some weak nations and some strong.

The stone

The last part of Nebuchadnezzar's dream showed a stone '*cut out without hands*' striking this great image on its feet, smashing it completely and replacing it. The stone became a great mountain and filled the earth. This is what we are waiting for. The stone represents Jesus and the culmination of the dream is a simple but effective way of demonstrating what he will do when he returns.

What will happen next?

So what do we see in our world today? Let us first summarize what we might expect to happen based on Bible prophecy. Israel will be invaded by a power described in Daniel chapter 11 as '*the king of the North*'. A power described as '*the king of the South*' will unsuccessfully resist the invader. When '*the king of the North*' has occupied the land of Israel, Jesus will return and destroy this invader of God's land. Jesus will then establish his kingdom starting in Israel. It will eventually be a worldwide kingdom and he will rule the whole world from Jerusalem.

We mentioned fulfilled prophecy in relation to the new State of Israel at the start of this article. From our point in time it's easy to look back and confidently say this is 'a sign in our



times'. After all, 'the king of the North' could not invade Israel if it didn't exist!

Much of what we are looking for relates to the identities of the opposing powers 'at the time of the end' described by the prophet Daniel as 'the king of the North' and 'the king of the South.' Can we be sure of the exact sequence of events at that time? Bible prophecy on these matters is not always easy to follow. No doubt this is to keep us busy looking and thinking. Also if everything was crystal clear it would reduce the need for faith and would contradict Jesus words:

'Behold, I am coming as a thief. Blessed is he who watches, and keeps his garments, lest he should walk naked and they see his shame' (Revelation 16.15).

Israeli fortifications on the Golan Heights on the border with Syria. Of great strategic importance, Golan was annexed by Israel in 1981

We are not meant to know the exact details or an exact time as Jesus told his disciples: 'But of that day and hour no one knows, no, not even the angels of heaven, but my Father only' (Matthew 24.36). Instead we have been given some certainties and a great deal to interpret, all for our encouragement.

The position of Israel today

Look at Israel today. It is in a very different position from what it was even 10 years ago. To the north is **Syria** under President Assad. It is an enemy but a predictable one, having learned the limitations of its power in the wars with Israel in 1967 and 1973.



It also tended to exert some control on Hezbollah in Lebanon, lowering the threat level to Israel. Now President Assad's hold on Syria seems to be failing. A likely outcome is for Syria to become like Lebanon, a mix of different religious and tribal groups always close to civil war. This unstable situation is perceived as a threat to the security of Israel.

To the south of Israel is **Egypt**. For over 30 years there has been a peace treaty in operation. Since the fall of President Mubarak, Egypt's commitment to the treaty is open to question. There are powerful forces in that country which are opposed to Israel, although very recently the Egyptian President has brokered a ceasefire between Israel and Gaza.

To the north east lies **Iran**. Israel is convinced that Iran is close to developing nuclear weapons. They understandably see this as a threat to their very existence. There is a serious possibility that they will attempt to destroy Iran's ability to develop these weapons. It is likely that a move to do this will escalate to involve other nations.

Israel's internal political situation has always been volatile but it is becoming almost toxic. No one can agree on how to tackle the problems.

If all this were not enough, Israel's relationship with its main and key ally, the **USA**, has weakened. What once seemed like almost unqualified support for Israel has changed. The USA is now more critical of Israel. They are very unlikely to abandon Israel, but together with the current political problems we have referred to and the perception amongst friend and foes alike that the USA is in decline, this increases Israel's isolation surrounded as it is by enemies. In these circumstances it seems that unilateral action by Israel is more likely to happen.

A personal message

All in all we see a situation that could easily and very quickly develop into the events described in Daniel chapter 11 concerning '*the time of the end*'. It is very encouraging to think that Jesus could be back very soon. It is also sobering. The time we have left to do our best to serve God in the way that He has shown us in the Bible and prepare for the time when Jesus will return to set up the kingdom of God, could be very short.

will you be ready?



JANUARY									
1	Gen. 1, 2	Psa. 1, 2	Matt. 1, 2	2	1	Gen. 1, 2	Psa. 1, 2	Matt. 1, 2	2
2	 3, 4	 3, 4	 3, 4	3	2	 3, 4	 3, 4	 3, 4	3
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5	 9, 10	 9, 10	 9, 10	6	5	 9, 10	 9, 10	 9, 10	6
6	 11, 12	 11, 12	 11, 12	7	6	 11, 12	 11, 12	 11, 12	7
7	 13, 14	 13, 14	 13, 14	8	7	 13, 14	 13, 14	 13, 14	8
8	 15, 16	 15, 16	 15, 16	9	8	 15, 16	 15, 16	 15, 16	9
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21	 36	 37	 37	22	21	 36	 37	 37	22
22	 37	 38	 38	23	22	 37	 38	 38	23
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24	 39, 40	 41	 41	25	24	 39, 40	 41	 41	25
25	 41	 42, 43	 42, 43	26	25	 41	 42, 43	 42, 43	26
26	 42, 43	 44, 45	 44, 45	27	26	 42, 43	 44, 45	 44, 45	27
27	 44, 45	 46, 47	 46, 47	28	27	 44, 45	 46, 47	 46, 47	28
28	 46, 47	 48, 50	 48, 50	29	28	 46, 47	 48, 50	 48, 50	29
29	 48, 50	 1, 2	 1, 2	30	29	 48, 50	 1, 2	 1, 2	30
30	 1, 2	 3, 4	 3, 4	31	30	 1, 2	 3, 4	 3, 4	31
31	 3, 4				31	 3, 4			

MAY									
1	Deut. 18	Eccles. 10	Ac	1	Deut. 18	Eccles. 10	Ac	1	Deut. 18
2	 19	 11	.....	2	 19	 11	.....	2	 19
3	 20	 12	.....	3	 20	 12	.....	3	 20
4	 21	Song 1	.....	4	 21	Song 1	.....	4	 21
5	 22	 2	.....	5	 22	 2	.....	5	 22
6	 23	 3	.....	6	 23	 3	.....	6	 23
7	 24	 4	.....	7	 24	 4	.....	7	 24
8	 25	 5	.....	8	 25	 5	.....	8	 25
9	 26	 6	.....	9	 26	 6	.....	9	 26
10	 27	 7	.....	10	 27	 7	.....	10	 27
11	 28	 8	.....	11	 28	 8	.....	11	 28
12	 29	Isaiah 1	.....	12	 29	Isaiah 1	.....	12	 29
13	 30	 2	.....	13	 30	 2	.....	13	 30
14	 31	 3	.....	14	 31	 3	.....	14	 31
15	 32	 4	.....	15	 32	 4	.....	15	 32
16	 33, 34	 5	.....	16	 33, 34	 5	.....	16	 33, 34
17	Joshua 1	 6	.....	17	Joshua 1	 6	.....	17	Joshua 1
18	 2	 7	.....	18	 2	 7	.....	18	 2
19	 3, 4	 8	.....	19	 3, 4	 8	.....	19	 3, 4
20	 5, 6	 9	.....	20	 5, 6	 9	.....	20	 5, 6
21	 7	 10	.....	21	 7	 10	.....	21	 7
22	 8	 11	.....	22	 8	 11	.....	22	 8
23	 9	 12	.....	23	 9	 12	.....	23	 9
24	 10	 13	.....	24	 10	 13	.....	24	 10
25	 11	 14	.....	25	 11	 14	.....	25	 11
26	 12	 15	.....	26	 12	 15	.....	26	 12
27	 13	 16	.....	27	 13	 16	.....	27	 13
28	 14	 17, 18		28	 14	 17, 18		28	 14
29	 15	 19		29	 15	 19		29	 15
30	 16	 20, 21		30	 16	 20, 21		30	 16
31	 17	 22		31	 17	 22		31	 17

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