

A desert landscape under a clear blue sky with a bright sun. In the foreground, two camels are visible, adorned with colorful, patterned blankets and tassels. The camel in the foreground is facing left, while the one behind it is facing right. In the background, the Great Pyramids of Giza are visible on the horizon.

Light

...on a new world

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

Volume 32.2

- * the Kingdom of God
- * 7500 miles non-stop!
- * Grace

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The Pyramids still witness to the glories of Egypt in the past. The modern State is very different, as the Jewish prophets predicted – see “signs of the times” page 11

LIGHT BIBLE PUBLICATIONS

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grace

The message of the Bible runs like a golden thread from Genesis to Revelation. There are many different ways that the message can be studied. For example we can read about the men and women whose lives are recorded in the Bible. We can examine the teaching of individual writers who wrote under divine inspiration such as Moses, David, Solomon, the prophets and apostles and most important of all, the teaching of Jesus.

In this article, we attempt to answer a few simple, yet vital questions. What is grace? Why is it important? How do we find it? How do we continue to receive it? What are we going to do about it? The word appears in the Bible many times, which gives us an indication of just how crucial 'grace' is to all those trying to follow Jesus.

The first occurrence of the word 'grace' is in the first book of the Bible:

'But Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD'

Genesis 6:8

The last is right at the end of the Bible:

'The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.'

Revelation 22:21

This shows how important is the theme of 'grace' to readers of God's Word.

What is grace?

If we look in a dictionary, various definitions will be given; but the one that best sums it up is 'undeserved kindness'. In the UK we may hear the phrase 'grace and favour' being used in connection with the Royal Family. Sometimes, after a life of service to the Queen, a servant is given a 'grace and favour' house or apartment to live in. This suggests that they didn't deserve to be rewarded in this way, whereas it could be seen as a reward for a lifetime of service. The phrase is used because the house was not part of the Queen's contract with that servant but was given over and above what the servant was entitled to, making it 'undeserved'.

Why is grace important?

The importance of grace cannot be underestimated. Without it we cannot be saved; it is as simple as that. We cannot earn salvation. We cannot be worthy. We cannot merit eternal life. The Bible says: *'for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus'* (Romans 3:23-24).

Therefore because we sin, we do not deserve eternal life. God has been merciful to us and given us the opportunity to obtain everlasting life through the sacrifice of Jesus, who died for our sins. Because our debts have been paid for by the blood of Jesus, the Scriptures say we can be justified, and because it did not cost us anything, it says we can be justified freely.

If someone gives us something freely (or for nothing), then it is a gift. If we have earned something through our own actions, then it would be like wages. This idea is summed up in the following Bible verses:

'For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.'

Ephesians 2:8,9

'For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.' Romans 6:23

The teaching of the Bible is quite clear - the only thing we can earn through our own actions is death. And the only way we can achieve eternal life is because God gives it to us as a gift.



The only thing we can earn through our own actions is death

How do we find grace?

In a way, we have already answered this question. We cannot earn it; we cannot win it. We can only be given it by God. However, God does not extend His grace where it is not wanted. Our Creator gives it to those who earnestly seek Him, to those who have faith in Him and to those who try to obey Him.

So faith is important – it encompasses belief in God and the things that He has promised:

‘But without faith it is impossible to please him, for he that comes to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of those who diligently seek him.’ Hebrews 11:6

Faith is something that we have to cultivate if we want to please God. Not everyone has a faith that can move mountains, but we must work with what we are given to make it grow. Jesus shows us this in his teaching contained in the parable of the talents (see Matthew 25:14-30). Some have more to start with and some less. The latter are not punished for this but rather praised, for working with what they have and making it grow. The servant who is punished is the one who does nothing except bury the talent underground. If we bury our faith in the same way,

then it is obviously dead and will not bring about an increase. The Apostle James puts it like this:

‘You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only... For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.’ James 2:24,26

In other words, if we believe or have faith in our saviour, Jesus Christ, we will want to do the works that show our faith is alive.

How do we continue in grace?

One of the mistakes made by many Christians is to believe in the ‘once saved, always saved’ concept. This is not taught in the Bible and anyone who accepts Jesus as their Saviour, but then effectively turns their back on him, or who allows other things such as careers, relationships, etc to take priority over their faith, is in for a big shock on judgement day! Even those making a big show of their faith, doing lots of high-profile things – but doing them for the wrong reasons or in the wrong spirit, they also are in danger of losing their grip on the great ‘prize’ as it is sometimes referred to in the Bible.

Even the Apostle Paul, with all the great things he did in the name of

Jesus, still had to 'carry on carrying on'. As he puts it in one of his letters: *'I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus'* (Philippians 3:14 KJV).

Believers are in a 'state of grace' and, if we continue, then we will be saved. In Jesus' words: *'...he who endures to the end will be saved'* (Matthew 10:22). There is no doubt at all that Jesus has done his part as a once and for all offering for sin, but we have to do our part, as Paul puts it, by *'patient continuance in doing good'* (Romans 2:7).

What are you going to do about grace?

Now that you understand a little about God's undeserved kindness towards us, what are you going to do? Is it just an intellectual exercise? Do you feel that no action is required, or are you going to examine your life and make sure that you are walking in the right direction? If you have not yet committed yourself to Jesus, then what are you waiting for? The Apostle Paul was asked this very question before his conversion:

**'And now why are you waiting?
Arise and be baptised, and wash
away your sins, calling on the
name of the Lord.'** Acts 22:16

We can teach you the basic truths of the Bible so necessary for salvation, and also baptise you when the time is right. If you have committed your life to Christ, you need to ask yourself whether your priorities are right –

are you seeking first the Kingdom? (Matthew 6:33).

are you regularly studying God's Word? (2 Timothy 3:15–16).

are you trying to live by it? (Matthew 4:4; 1 Peter 1:22–23).

Remember! None of these things will earn you salvation, but if you aren't doing them, what does it tell you about your faith? (James 2:26). Is it a living faith that is a central part of your life, or is it an academic faith that only deals in theories, not realities, or one that is only evident on Sundays?

Only you can answer these questions for yourself and only you can do something about it. God's grace is freely available if we truly desire to seek Him. Don't miss this opportunity, but rather turn to God while there is still time.

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Etruscan dancers and musicians about 500 BC

Have you ever visited Rome?

One ethnic group you will not see in Rome, or Italy, or indeed anywhere, is the Etruscans. And yet around 2,800 years ago they were contemporary with the ancient Romans. So, what happened to the Etruscans? 'Etruscan civilisation endured until it was assimilated into Roman society ... The reduction in Etruscan territory was gradual, but after 500 BC, the political balance of power on the Italian peninsula shifted away from the Etruscans in favour of the rising Roman Republic' (Source: Wikipedia). They were assimilated out of individual ethnic existence, the common fate of many ethnic groups throughout history.

The survival of the Jews

But you will at some stage, perhaps unknowingly, walk past a Jew. They are an ancient ethnic group pre-dating both the Etruscans and the Romans. They originated with Abraham around 4,000 years ago and fell on hard times several generations later as a result of a catastrophic famine. In order to survive, the family group emigrated to Egypt. Many years later they came out of Egypt, thought to be around 2 million strong, and a little later conquered and settled in what is now the land of Israel.

There were many ups and downs throughout their long history, until the Romans destroyed them as a nation in AD 70 and sold many of them into slavery throughout the Roman Empire. Finally, in AD 132,

they banished most of the remaining Jews from Israel. You would think that after that, the Jews as an ethnic group would have been assimilated into other cultures and ceased to exist as a distinct people, just like the Etruscans! But they clearly haven't disappeared, and since 1948 have been back in Israel as a nation state again. Like them or not, their continuing existence is an amazing and utterly unprecedented story.

Some years ago, I read a fascinating article written by a Jew in which he suggested some odds about Jewish survival, and made a calculation of the probability of this happening. Here's a short summary of how he calculated his odds using some, but by no means all, of the predictions made in the Bible about what would happen to the Jews. I've abridged his words for this article. Just **five predictions about the Jews** lead to a compelling conclusion. You can find these predictions in Deuteronomy chapter 28:

1 Total destruction and exile – let's say that this occurred in 10% of all ancient wars. A probability of 1/10.

2 How often did the conqueror speak an unknown language? We don't know. Neighbours did fight, and the languages of great empires

were widely known. Let's say generously that it happened a quarter of the time giving us a probability of 1/4.

3 Being scattered all over the world as a result of exile, as far as I know, didn't happen at all. Strictly I suppose the probability should be zero! But let's be generous and give it a probability of 1/10.

4 To take a nation that is scattered all over the world and thus be unable to organise itself into an independent society again. I don't know what the probability of that would be, so I'll give it a probability of 1/4.

5 To survive under these conditions and return to one's land has never happened in the history of the world – strictly speaking we should give it a probability of zero! But let's be generous and say 1/10.

Now, when you have predictions for a sequence of events, and each event has a probability, and you want to know the probability of them all coming true, you multiply the probabilities together. So, we multiply $1/10 \times 1/4 \times 1/10 \times 1/4 \times 1/10$ and we come out with a probability of **1/16,000**. This is a very small number. That is the confidence that a neutral observer would have in this

prediction. What is the likelihood that a prediction like this would come true? One chance in every sixteen thousand tries. Given the evidence the observer had to go on, there is no way for him to explain why it came true.

If you find this interesting, I recommend reading the author's material which is available online at https://ohr.edu/explore_judaism/living_up_to_the_truth/living_up_to_the_truth/2052

The bottom line for me is this. It's impossible to explain the history of the Jews without acknowledging the exercise of some form of supernatural control over past events. If you've been reading Christadelphian literature, you'll understand that we

believe the Jews are God's people. It follows from this that what has happened, is happening now, and is prophesied in the Bible to happen to Israel in the future, is central to God's plan for this world. And ultimately this is the Gospel message, and really is very good news for anyone who chooses to believe it, but that's an important caveat. You have to choose to believe it. So, yesterday's history in Israel has led to today's events in Israel which will in turn lead to future events in Israel. Namely the return of Jesus Christ.

Israel and the Middle East

Israel's fourth election in just two years has been more of the same – inconclusive. As I write this article the race is on to form a viable



coalition and therefore be qualified to govern. In some ways this is not a new situation. Israel's system of government makes it almost impossible for any one political party to win a majority of seats in its 120-member parliament, the Knesset. Coalitions are a way of life in such a system. What is different in recent years is the difficulty of forming any lasting coalitions. They are very fragile; they get formed and fall apart because there is so much dispute. The differences are bitter, and it is difficult to reach any lasting consensus. Throw into that mix some strong personalities and the result is exactly what is happening.

Any government in Israel faces all the usual challenges that governments face. That is once they can finally form a government of course! But they also face an unusual issue of utmost importance - national survival. They are a relatively small nation existing in a hostile environment. Changes in their relations with other countries in the region and beyond are interesting. There has recently been a historic normalisation of relations with several Arab countries, which is a distinct change from the past. Several of the Gulf states now have normal diplomatic relations with Israel. Egypt and

Jordan have been at peace with Israel since the last century. Though relations with Saudi Arabia are not official, the two countries do have a close and developing working relationship, especially in matters involving security. The main driver for this relationship is not hard to see. They have a common enemy in Iran.

On the other hand, relations with Iran, Lebanon (at least the part controlled by Hezbollah) and Syria are hostile. And formerly close relations with Turkey are not good either.

Beyond the Middle East, Israel has an ambivalent relationship with the EU and now the UK, but co-operates with Russia where they have mutual but sometimes conflicting interests (especially in Syria) to avoid conflict. The critical relationship with the US continues. Critical because to date the US has been the guarantor of Israel's existence. Note though this hasn't been tested since the 1973 Yom Kippur war where US logistic support, as a counter to threats from the then USSR, were a decisive factor in Israel's hard-won victory and ongoing survival.

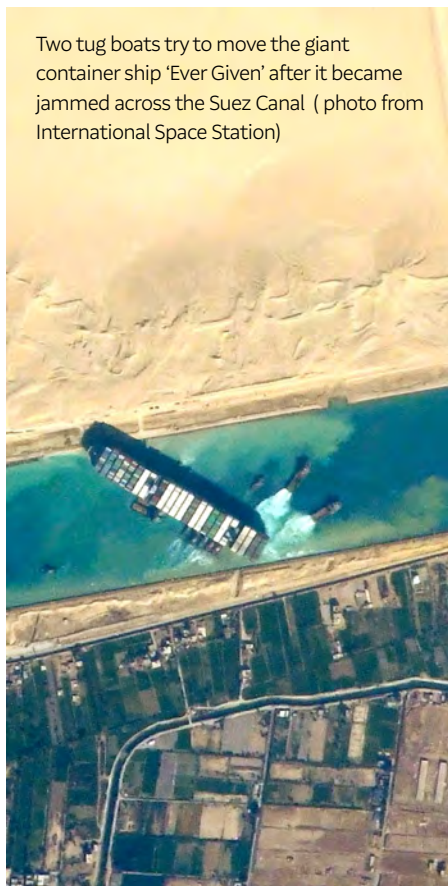
So, all in all, a stable but far from unassailable situation for Israel at

present. For a Bible student it is not hard to see the catastrophic situation described in Zechariah chapter 14 being fulfilled. But note the events that are described as following on in the rest of the chapter, particularly verse 16 which reads: *‘And it shall come to pass that everyone who is left of all the nations which came against Jerusalem shall go up from year to year to worship the King, the Lord of hosts...’*. It’s well worth reading the whole chapter.

Elsewhere in the Middle East, Israel’s closest neighbours are all experiencing problems of their own. In Jordan there are accusations of a planned coup involving the crown prince. What could simply be a royal power struggle is set against a backdrop of economic strife, widespread corruption and incompetence. Lebanon continues to stagger from one crisis to the next and remains split between Hezbollah (allies of Iran and deeply anti-Israel) and the other parties (probably best described as neutral regarding Israel). Egypt seems stable in its impoverished existence.

The huge container ship that blocked the Suez Canal for a week, causing an economic scare world-wide, has been freed. Compare the present situation

Two tug boats try to move the giant container ship ‘Ever Given’ after it became jammed across the Suez Canal (photo from International Space Station)



in Egypt with the glories of its past under the Pharaohs, when Egypt was a world power. It’s interesting to see the words of the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel fulfilled so completely: *‘It shall be the lowliest of kingdoms; it shall never again exalt itself above the nations, for I will diminish them so that they will not rule over the nations any more’* (Ezekiel 29:15).



President Bashar al-Assad of Syria greets his supporter President Putin of Russia

Against all the odds, President Assad survives in Syria. The ruinous civil war has devastated the country for the last decade. But he survives and even thrives. Of all the countries involved in that civil war, it is Russia that has had the only clear and consistent objective. They wished to maintain Assad's power. And they have. It can be reasonably argued that Russia has been the only country to have been successful in its intervention in the Middle East. Definitely something for Bible students to watch.

The US presidency and Israel

The new US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, declared earlier this year that 'America is back'. Exactly how ready the rest of the world is for this is certainly an open question, but

it is unlikely that things will snap back to where they were prior to Donald Trump's presidency. The shape of the new world order is yet to be determined.

The new US administration has already had a significant effect on Israel. To the south of Israel, President Biden has indicated that the US will no longer support the Saudis with their war in Yemen. The Saudis have been pursuing this war because they believe Iran is supporting the Houthis - one of the main protagonists trying to take over Yemen. The withdrawal of US support is likely to have a massive effect in Yemen with knock-on effects throughout the Middle East.

Mr Biden has also indicated that he wishes to revive the nuclear deal with Iran. Both these actions affect Israel because both relate to their arch enemy Iran. Israel's PM, Mr Netanyahu, has responded with the threat that Israel will deal with Iran's nuclear program - without the US if necessary.

This is not to suggest that Israel and the US are not allies. But the dynamic between the two countries has changed, and there is certainly scope

for more to come. To me it poses the question – will the US stop supporting Israel?

Conclusion

*‘...Truly the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil; **madness** is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead’ (Ecclesiastes 9:3 –my emphasis).*

This Bible verse seems particularly apt in the light of so much that is both happening, and indeed not happening, in our world. Let me explain. But first note that the word ‘madness’ that I’ve highlighted can also be translated as ‘folly’.

In Israel, as in so many other places, there is a situation where very strongly held, but totally opposing,

views are common. So much so, that despite the obvious and in some cases, desperate need to move forward on issues like climate change, pandemics and more, nothing much happens.

The same sort of thing applies in so many other countries. You don’t have to look hard to see examples. Personal and national egos and attitudes, for example ‘America first’, add a further layer of complexity on obtaining agreement and appropriate and timely action to fix national and international problems.

It’s just as well Jesus is coming back. I hope and pray that it happens soon.

David Gamble
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Joe Biden is sworn in as President of the United States



what is the Kingdom of God?

‘Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.’

Matthew 6:9-13

These words are part of a prayer known as ‘The Lord’s Prayer’. They are straightforward and unambiguous, and countless people have repeated them many times. However, for the vast majority their meaning is lost. It is therefore not surprising that they do not understand what they are asking for. In reality, the Lord Jesus Christ is to return to establish God’s Kingdom on earth and this is the very essence of ‘The Lord’s Prayer’. Ever since Jesus taught his disciples this prayer, true believers have been asking God to establish His kingdom here on earth, that His will may be done on earth as it has always been done in heaven. There can be no doubt then that the kingdom which we must pray for, is to be a divine kingdom, to be set up here on earth and that when it comes, men and women will learn to do His will.

The Bible does not teach that the Kingdom of God is the church, or a spiritual reign of grace in the hearts

of believers, or that it is in heaven (although of course, God does rule there – see Ecclesiastes 5:2; Matthew 5:34). Instead, the Bible teaches that the Kingdom of God will be a literal kingdom here on earth, when God’s promise will be fulfilled: *‘but truly as I live, all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord’* (Numbers 14:21; see also Habakkuk 2:14).

It is essential then that we know just what this kingdom is, for how can we look forward to something that we do not understand? It may come as a surprise to many people to learn that thousands of years ago God chose the land that is to be the very centre of His kingdom, the land which we now know as Israel, with its capital city Jerusalem. It is soon to become the capital of the whole world. Jesus will reign there as he said to his disciples: *‘But I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God’s throne; nor by the earth, for it is his footstool: nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King’* (Matthew 5:34-35).

David, who reigned as king in Jerusalem 3,000 years ago, described this city as: *‘Beautiful in elevation, the*

joy of the whole earth... Mount Zion... the city of the great King' (Psalm 48.2). Mount Zion is part of Jerusalem and God has chosen to place His name there as He reminded David's son, King Solomon (see 2 Chronicles 6:6).

God's Kingdom in the past

The ancient nation of Israel agreed to obey God's law and they became the kingdom of God on earth (See Exodus 19:3-8). They were given a succession of leaders, judges and finally kings. Nevertheless, throughout their history, Israel remained God's kingdom. Samuel, the last of the judges was reminded of this when the people clamoured for a human king, like the surrounding nations. God said to Samuel: '...they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them' (1 Samuel 8:7).

King David recognised that it was the kingdom of God over which he ruled. Referring to the succession of his son Solomon, he said: '...he has chosen my son Solomon to sit on the throne of the kingdom of the Lord over Israel.' (1 Chronicles 28:5). After the death of Solomon, the kingdom was divided into two parts, the northern kingdom of Israel with its capital in Samaria, and the southern kingdom of Judah with its capital in Jerusalem.

King after king reigned over Judah in Jerusalem. Some were good kings but the majority were evil, so much so that the nation became corrupt and turned to idolatry.

After 400 years God brought His kingdom to an end through the fulfilment of these remarkable words of the prophet Ezekiel, addressed to their last king, Zedekiah: *'I will overturn, overturn, overturn, it: and it shall be no more, until he come whose right it is; and I will give it him'* (Ezekiel 21:27 KJV). But even then did you notice there was a promise of restoration in these words?

Note from that verse that someone was to come *'whose right it is'* to occupy the throne of this future kingdom of God. Of that restoration Ezekiel prophesied:

'And I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel; and one king shall be king over them all; they shall no longer be two nations, nor shall they ever be divided into two kingdoms again ...they shall be my people, and I will be their God'

Ezekiel 37:22-23

These words were written a long time after King David's death and refer to that greater son of David who was to

come. This is confirmed by the words of the angel to Mary, the mother of Jesus: *'He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David. And he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end'* (Luke 1:32–33). Jesus is the one *'whose right it is'*, the one who is heir to the throne of David, who will reign over the whole world from Jerusalem.

God's appointed king

Jesus clearly understood that he was destined to be that king. At his trial Pilate asked him: *'Are you a king then?'* He replied: *'You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world...'* (John 18:37). Over the cross on which he was crucified, was written:

'THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS' (Matthew 27:37).

His enemies of course had intended to mock him, but what Pilate had written was true.

This was the main theme of our Lord's preaching while here on earth; it was the gospel or good news of the coming Kingdom of God (see for example Matthew 4:23 and Luke 8:1). When Jesus sent his disciples to preach, it was the same message: *'He*

sent them to preach the kingdom of God...' (Luke 9.2).

That is why Jesus is coming back – to set up the Kingdom of God here on earth. This kingdom will be the restored ancient Kingdom of Israel. The disciples of Jesus clearly understood this, so much so, that after his resurrection they were eager to know when it would happen. They asked him: *'...Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?'* His reply indicated that the time was not yet, but was predetermined by his Father (Acts 1:6–7).

The extent of the Kingdom

The Kingdom over which Jesus will rule will extend far beyond the first Kingdom of God. Indeed it will extend over the whole earth and it will last for ever, as foretold by the prophet Daniel:

'... the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever.'

Daniel 2:44

In the Psalms we are given some amazing prophetic word pictures of the time when God's kingdom is established on earth. Read through

Psalms 2 and 72 from which the following verses are taken:

‘Yet I have set my King on my holy hill of Zion... Ask of me, and I will give you the nations for your inheritance, and the ends of the earth for your possession.’

Psalm 2:6,8

‘He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.’ Psalm 72:8

The rule of Jesus Christ

When Jesus was born, the angels sang for joy: *‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will towards men!’* (Luke 2:14). From that day to this there has not been any real lasting peace on this earth, and there never will be, until Jesus returns to establish God's Kingdom. The Old Testament prophets tell us a lot about the Kingdom and give glimpses of the time of peace and tranquillity, when all nations will be blessed as promised to Abraham, Israel's founding father (see Genesis 12:1-3).

The Prophet Isaiah foretold that Jerusalem will be the centre of government in the coming Kingdom of God:

‘... out of Zion (Jerusalem) shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.’ Isaiah 2:3



‘... the government will be upon his shoulder. And his name will be called Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David and over his kingdom, to order it and establish it with

judgement and justice from that time forward even for ever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this.’

Isaiah 9:6-7

The prophet Micah also describes the great changes that will take place:

‘He (Jesus Christ) shall judge between many peoples, and rebuke strong nations afar off; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. But everyone shall sit under his vine and under his fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken.’

Micah 4:3-4

But before there can be peace and security, men and women must learn to walk in God’s way. As long as men and women continue to go their own way there will be no peace. The nations will be instructed in God’s way as we learn from the prophet Isaiah:

‘Many people shall come and say, “Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; he will teach us of his ways, and we shall walk in his paths ...”’

Isaiah 2:3

‘...your eyes shall see your teachers. Your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, “This is the way, walk in it...”’

Isaiah 30:20-21

The Kingdom of God is the subject of many Old Testament prophecies. Here are some further prophetic word pictures from the prophecy of Isaiah:

‘...the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose; it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice, even with joy and singing... They shall see the glory of the LORD... the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb sing. For waters shall burst forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert... and the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing, with everlasting joy on their heads. They shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.’

Isaiah 35:1-2,5-6,10

‘They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and

another eat; for as the days of a tree, so shall be the days of my people, and my elect shall long enjoy the work of their hands.'

Isaiah 65:21-22

What a glorious picture of tranquility and healthy living is presented here! This is what men and women have striven for and have been unable to obtain, yet it is a picture that will become a reality when all people are subject to God's laws.

The return of Jesus Christ

After his resurrection, Jesus was taken up into heaven. His disciples who witnessed him go, were told: '*... 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). Jesus then is to return literally to this earth (See also Acts 3.19-21).

But when? As we have already noted, Jesus told his disciples that no one knows the exact time (Matthew 24.36; Acts 1:6-7). However, during his ministry Jesus gave some very important and unmistakable signs about events which were to occur in the world, so that his followers might be prepared for his return (see Luke 21:25-28).

We believe that we are now living in the times spoken of by Jesus; we stand on the very brink of these world-changing events when he will return to establish God's Kingdom. God's kingdom is a very important part of the true Christian Gospel. We urge you to study God's Word the Bible, diligently. It is a great privilege, for in so doing you will have an opportunity to know and believe these wonderful divine promises. You can then become associated with the Lord Jesus Christ through belief and baptism. When Jesus returns as King, you will, if found faithful, live for ever with him in that glorious Kingdom here on earth.

Let us then continue to pray all the more earnestly, as Jesus taught his disciples to pray:

'your kingdom come.'

Editor's note:

This is a re-print of an article by Roy Shakespeare published in this magazine 20 years ago. The writer is now asleep in Christ, awaiting the day when his Master will return to raise the dead and reward his faithful servants with places in the Kingdom of God.

a clear conscience

The word 'conscience' is referred to about 30 times in the Bible, all of them in the New Testament. All are a translation of the same Greek word. Its basic meaning is the ability to see both sides of an argument clearly. From this comes the idea of conscience being the faculty which enables us to identify what is right and what is wrong, helping us to control our behaviour.

Self-knowledge

One Bible student defined its meaning as 'a knowing within oneself', while another wrote that 'to have a good conscience is to be able to look in the face the knowledge which one shares with no-one but oneself and not be ashamed'. That is a particularly challenging observation. If you have a clear conscience you can look in the face the knowledge which is intensively private to yourself – knowledge which you share with nobody else at all, not even those closest to you, and still not be ashamed about anything. That is what a good, clear conscience would feel like.

When the Apostle Paul wrote his letter to the Ephesians, he talked about some who were 'past

feeling' (Ephesians 4:19). One writer has described them as 'stifling their consciences'. So it seems that some members of the church in Ephesus had apparently ceased to feel, or had deliberately suppressed, the emotions which told them what was right and what was wrong!

The Greek word Paul used in his letter literally means that the consciences of the Christians he was writing to in Ephesus had become 'calloused'. A callous is 'a toughened area of skin which has become thick and hard due to repeated pressure'. This callousing, or hardening, had affected their consciences. They had become '**thick skinned**', insensitive to the mental discomfort that a more effective and sensitive conscience would have made them feel when they contemplated doing things that were wrong.

When writing a personal letter to the young man Timothy, Paul refers to false teachers whose consciences had been 'seared with a hot iron' (1 Timothy 4:2). The allusion is to the practice of branding slaves to show who their owners were. The effect of branding with heated metal was to burn a mark into the skin, resulting in the affected area becoming

permanently scarred and completely insensitive. One writer translated Paul's letter to Timothy with the words 'whose consciences are as dead as seared flesh' (J B Phillips).

A constant danger

It is a warning to all of us that it is possible to abuse our own conscience and, by our behaviour, the consciences of others – to make them less effective. In fact, our consciences may cease to be effective at all. The basic meaning of conscience – the ability to see both sides of an argument clearly – means that our consciences can only work efficiently if they are fed with the information that will allow them to understand both sides of the argument. Naturally speaking we are all tempted to do evil things; it's just part of our human nature, as one Old Testament writer put it: *'The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?'* (Jeremiah 17:9).

So, none of us need to be taught anything about how to be evil! Bad behaviour comes naturally to us all and needs to be kept in check. We are in constant danger of behaving badly. We only have ourselves to blame when we do 'devilish' things. To stop that happening our conscience needs help. It constantly

needs to hear the other side of the argument, the good behaviour that needs to be encouraged.

If our conscience is to be instructed in the good things that do not come to us naturally, then we have to do that educating ourselves. We have to give our conscience the information it needs, to help us make the correct decisions when we are in difficult circumstances and tempted to do evil. It's a constant struggle.

Help is at hand

We can help ourselves by learning more about God and His ways from His Word, the Bible. The Apostle Paul leaves us with powerful advice in one of the speeches he made when he was explaining what he believed: *'I have hope in God...that there will be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and the unjust. This being so, I myself always strive to have a conscience without offence towards God and men'* (Acts 24:15-16).

If the hope that Paul had is to be our hope too, then we need to follow his example and strive to make sure that it's a 'clear conscience' that always governs our lives.

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The History of Israel part 2

Having looked at the forefathers of the nation of Israel – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and the heads of the twelve tribes, we now turn to the start of the period when the descendants of Abraham were becoming a large number of people.

At the insistence of Pharaoh and Joseph, Jacob's family moved to Egypt during that great seven-year famine. From that point onwards, over a period of about 200 years, the descendants of Jacob, called Hebrews, multiplied in number and were seen as a threat by the Pharaoh. The Hebrews became slaves to the Egyptians. We now move to the book of Exodus.

Read Exodus chapter one.

Moses

The Hebrew tribal families kept their separate identities. This is how the twelve tribes of Israel came into being. Moses was born into the tribe of Levi. However, at this time, Pharaoh was concerned that the Hebrew population was becoming too large to control. He saw the rising Hebrew population as a threat to Egypt and ordered all the Hebrew baby boys to be killed at birth. Moses was preserved from the extermination of infants by his parents and ended up being brought up in the house of Pharaoh's daughter.

Read Exodus chapter 2 and Hebrews 11:24–26.

It is important to bear in mind that all these events were overseen by God so that His will was done in moving towards the fulfilment of the promises made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

As referred to in the previous issue of Light, many of the Old Testament (OT) Israelite leaders were 'types' of Jesus Christ. Moses is no exception. In the New Testament, during his defence before the Jewish Council, Stephen makes the point that, just as the Jews rejected Joseph, Moses, and all their prophets sent by God, so they rejected Jesus too. He was the greatest prophet of all.

Read Acts chapter seven.

God appeared to Moses in the wilderness of Midian (on the west side of the Red Sea) at the 'burning bush'. God promised to save Israel from the slavery of Egypt and move them to the land of Canaan, which He had promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Read Exodus chapter three.

Take special note of what God says to Moses about His Memorial Name. In Hebrew the Name is phonetically spelt 'Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh' or 'I will be who I will be'. It is a declaration of God's eternal purpose. This was outlined in the article dealing with the nature of God (see Light Volume 29.1 page 8).

God sent Moses and his brother Aaron to Pharaoh to seek the release of the Israelites. Pharaoh would not release them, and God unleashed ten terrible plagues that devastated the nation and land of Egypt.

The ten plagues

Read Exodus chapter seven through to the end of chapter ten and look at Psalm 105:23–38.

Why did God plague the Egyptians in this way? The plagues were a sign:

- ❖ to all nations that Israel were (and still are) God's chosen people.
- ❖ to Israel that God was with them and would save them from the ravages of the idolatrous nations around them, beginning with Egypt.
- ❖ of God's anger with idolatrous nations.

The last of the plagues was the slaying of the firstborn of every household in Egypt. Israel was saved from the plague by keeping the Passover. This is an important point in the Bible narrative and is loaded with meaning for anyone seeking to serve the God of the Bible. Every Israelite household had to kill (or share with another household) a male lamb, and daub the blood on the door frame of their house. This would be a sign to the destroying angel who moved through Egypt slaying the firstborn. On seeing the blood on the door frames, the angel 'passed over' those households.

The Passover lamb had to be prepared as a meal without breaking any of its bones. It was eaten with bitter herbs and unleavened bread. The Israelites were also commanded to keep this ceremony every year in memory of their salvation from the last plague – the killing of the firstborn in Egypt. Even today Jews celebrate the Passover and share a special family meal.

Read Exodus 12:1–30.

The meaning of the Passover

In 1 Corinthians 5:7 we read: *‘Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us’*. All the rituals associated with the feast of Passover are representative of Jesus Christ. Just as the blood of the lamb painted on the door frame saved the Israelites, so the blood of Jesus, the Lamb of God, saves those who identify with that sacrifice. John the Baptist on seeing Jesus said: *‘Behold! the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!’* (John 1:29).

We also find that Jesus was crucified at the time of the feast of Passover and his shed blood is deeply symbolic, even today, for his followers. His death and resurrection atoned for their sins, confirming the divinely established principle that *‘without shedding of blood, there can be no remission’* [of sins] (Hebrews 9:22).

The Exodus

After the devastating tenth plague the Egyptian Pharaoh let the Hebrews go. The Israelites journeyed eastwards into the desert, but the Egyptian Pharaoh changed his mind and ordered his army to follow them and bring them back.

Israel journeyed through the wilderness of Sinai towards Canaan, the land of promise. They were led by God, manifested by a pillar of cloud in daytime and a pillar of fire by night. *Read Exodus 13: 1–22.*

The Children of Israel crossed the Red Sea when God miraculously parted the water. When the Egyptians attempted to follow, they were drowned by the returning waters. *Read Exodus 14 where this event is described.*

The Israelites were miraculously kept alive in the wilderness by God who had released them from Egypt. God provided:

- ❖ Quails: birds (Exodus 16:11–13).
- ❖ Manna: appeared on the ground overnight like dew (Exodus 16:13–36).
- ❖ Water: from the rock that God commanded Moses to strike (Exodus 17:1–7)

These things might seem inconsequential to us so long after they happened, but the Apostle Paul draws attention to the fact that all these events have deep spiritual and prophetic meaning for believers today.

Read 1 Corinthians 10:1-11.

Manna = the bread of life = Jesus – *read John 6:30-35.*

Water = the water of life = Jesus – *read John 4:14.*

The narrative of Numbers 20:7-13 gives us great insight into the obedience and the level of belief that God requires of His servants. Moses, their leader, became angry with his people the Israelites, and struck the rock twice instead of speaking to it as God had commanded. God punished Moses by forfeiting his entry to the promised land, because he ‘*spoke rashly*’ (Psalm 106:33) and did not believe that God’s Word was enough to bring water out of the rock. This was a temporary loss of faith which God pardoned, for Moses is included with the heroes of faith listed in Hebrews 11 who will inherit the promised land.

Read Hebrews 11:24-28; 39-40.

We can see in this incident a type or metaphor. The rock symbolised Christ and the water of life came out of the rock, yet Christ was struck once in the sense that he sacrificed his life once to give everyone the water of life freely. In striking the rock twice we might consider that Moses broke the symbology of the rock and the water in the context of Christ’s mission as the saviour. *Read Psalm 106:32-33; Numbers 27:12-14.*

The Law of Moses

Three months after fleeing Egypt, God appeared to the Israelites at Mount Sinai. He made a covenant with them, extending the promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God confirmed that they were His special people if they obeyed Him. He gave Israel a code of laws, referred to as ‘the Law of Moses’, because Moses was the person through whom God communicated it to Israel. They needed and were given:

- ❖ consistent laws to govern their affairs, including spiritual and moral laws to demonstrate their holiness and separation from the nations around them. They were God’s people.
- ❖ a means to obtain forgiveness for sin achieved through animal sacrifice.

- ❖ a system of law that foreshadowed the way salvation would be made possible for all through the work, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Looking forward to Christ

However, the Law of Moses could never save the Israelites from death because it was impossible to keep the law perfectly.

Read Galatians 2:16 and 3:10

Also, animal sacrifices could never achieve what the single sacrifice of Christ's life achieved.

Read Hebrews 10:1-10.

The sacrifices of the Law of Moses pointed forward to the perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. In this way:

- ❖ The law was fulfilled (Matthew 5:17).
- ❖ Christ did away with the requirement for animal sacrifices under the Law by nailing it to his cross (Colossians 2:13-14).

These two points demonstrate how the means of salvation from sin and death became possible for any who choose to accept it.

We can see that the Law of Moses is not binding on anyone who believes that Christ died to take away the sin of the world (John 1:29). The Apostle Paul describes the Law of Moses as a 'schoolmaster' that prepared the way for Jesus Christ. Paul condemned those who, in the first century AD, regarded themselves righteous by keeping the Law of Moses, regardless of the work of Christ. Because Christ took away the requirements of the Law of Moses it is described as the 'old covenant'. It is 'old' in contrast with 'the new covenant' described in the letter to the Hebrews.

Read: Hebrews 7:19; 9:6-15; Galatians 3:19-25 and 4:9-10.

A true Christian is subject to the much higher moral and spiritual law of Christ (Galatians 5:1-6). We will look at Christ's law that was brought into being by His work later in this series. In the meantime, it can be noted that the NT letter to the Hebrews should be considered as the divine commentary on the Law of Moses in the context of the work of Christ.

The Wilderness Journey

In spite of their miraculous deliverance from Egypt and their daily provisions in the wilderness, Israel forgot their God. They complained, rebelled and on occasions turned to other so-called gods. When, after two years, God said it was time to spy out the land of Canaan with a view to taking it by force, the Israelites decided it was a bad idea. God punished them for this, forcing them to wander in the wilderness for another 38 years. Not until that adult generation had died in the wilderness did God encourage them again to take the land of promise.

Read: Psalm 106:6-33; Numbers 13 and 14; Hebrews 3:17-19.

The Exodus in summary

The Exodus from Egypt under God's guiding hand is a very important event in Israel's history. It demonstrates that they were and still are a separate people chosen by God. This fact is referred to many times in both the Old and New Testaments. Additionally, we can see that the Exodus is a parable of man's salvation by God as shown by the following summary:

Slavery and bondage in Egypt – human bondage to sin and death

Read: Romans 6:20.

Passover and escape from Egypt – the way of escape from sin and death made possible by the sacrifice of Jesus. *Read 1 Corinthians 5:7.*

Passing through the Red Sea – baptism into Jesus' saving name

Read: 1 Corinthians 10:2.

The wilderness journey – a time of testing for God's servants in their everyday lives.

Entrance into the promised land – the reward of the faithful in the Kingdom of God on earth when Jesus returns.

Next time in this series, God willing, we will look at how the Israelites conquered Canaan under the leadership of Joshua. We'll consider how God ruled the Israelites after they were established in Canaan and how Israel rejected God in favour of a human king.

*‘And God said... let birds fly above the earth
across the expanse of the sky’* Genesis 1:20 NIV



COMMENT

I cannot claim to be a keen bird watcher, but I live quite close to Minsmere, a well-known bird sanctuary on the Suffolk coast of England. A few years ago, on a visit with some friends, we managed to identify one particular bird, a **godwit**. To be more precise, a black-tailed godwit (*Limosa limosa*), a member of the sandpiper family (see picture above). The name stuck in my head.

You don't really expect a godwit to feature in the news, but towards the end of last year that is just what happened. This bird is a record breaker! On 16 September 2020 a godwit fitted with a satellite tag flew for 11 straight days from its feeding grounds in Alaska to Auckland in New Zealand, a distance of 7,500 miles (12,000 kilometres – see map opposite) without stopping, setting a new record for non-stop flight among birds known to scientists. So reported the Guardian newspaper. The bird made its journey back to Alaska in March, this time with a stopover at the Yellow Sea in China.

7500 miles non-stop!

The Global Flyway Network is a group of scientists that study such migration. Their comment is interesting:

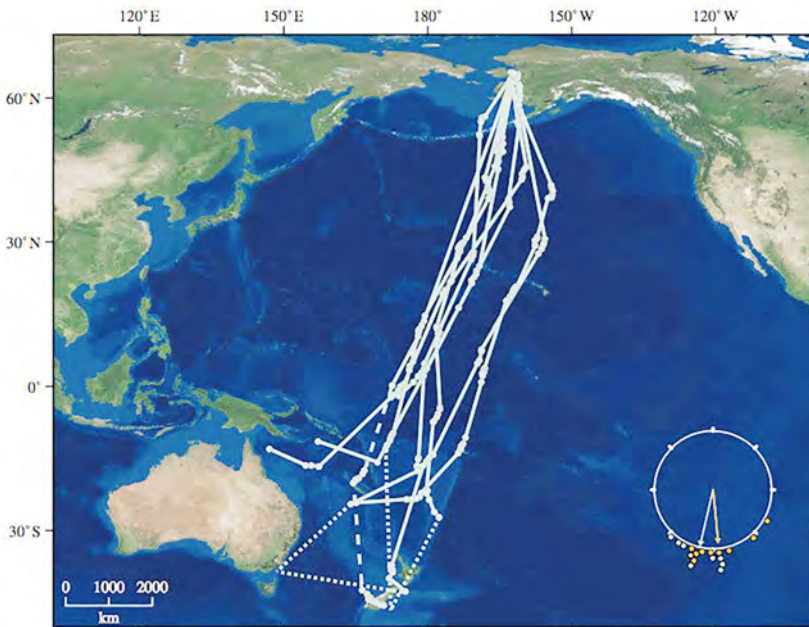
‘They (godwits) have an incredibly efficient fuel-to-energy rate. They have a lot of things going for them. They are designed like a jet fighter. Long, pointed wings and a really sleek design, which gives them a lot of aerodynamic potential’.

The writer, Jesse Conklin, an ornithologist, twice refers to the ‘**design**’ of the godwit, as if it is quite obvious – and so it is. But most ornithologists believe that all birds evolved from dinosaurs through that vast series of accidents which we are told produced all living things, and which is called evolution. There is a big problem here.

We know a lot about design. Our ability to design things is a feature of human beings without parallel in the rest of the natural world. Many people have spent a lot of time designing, and know a bit about the design process.

The flight of the godwit tracked by satellite.

Published by Proceedings of the Royal Society B 2009. Robert E. Gill, et al/USGS/The Royal Society



Here is the problem:

Design is a thought process

When, in everyday life, we recognise that something has been designed rather than just happening by chance, it is because we recognise the thought process behind it, we see the intention, the purpose of the design, and how the various parts contribute to one overall plan. Saul Bass, a well-known American designer and filmmaker, says ‘design is thought made visible’. That may sound profound, but in reality, when you think about it, it’s quite obvious. Sometimes we lose sight of the obvious.

Evolution is thoughtless and mindless

As a design process, evolution falls at the very first hurdle, because it has no idea what it is doing. Design starts with an idea. You don’t just say, ‘I am going to design’ – design needs an object: **what** are you going to design?

‘I’m going to design a teaspoon... a can-opener... a watch... a computer... a satellite.’

Having set the target, the design begins and is guided throughout by that initial concept. Every mark on the paper, every click of the mouse, is driven by that original objective. Every step is evaluated in the light of that idea, and reviewed to see if the design is going in the right direction.

In total contrast, all evolutionary change is undirected – the toss of a coin, the spin of a roulette wheel. At no point can evolution work towards a specific objective. Never does it have any inkling what it is doing, because it is not an intelligent process. It doesn’t have any ideas at all – ‘inklings’ are out!

Make no mistake – **if the godwit evolved then it was not designed.** Evolution never designed anything – it is in every respect the very opposite of the design process. If the godwit looks as if it was designed, then we should consider that perhaps it was.

Every special feature of the godwit is coordinated to achieve its overall performance. Its shape is aero-dynamic, to achieve minimal wind

resistance in flight and reduce the energy required. Its metabolism is super-efficient to make maximum use of the energy available. It has the astonishing ability to shrink its internal organs during flight to reduce space and weight. It is able to double its weight by storing energy as fat before its marathon journey. It has an incredible navigation system, a mental picture of the world in its tiny bird brain which enables it to fly nearly a third of the way round the globe, using and compensating for wind and weather, to a pin-point destination. All these abilities are interdependent and work together. If they evolved, they had to evolve together, mutation after mutation accidentally conspiring to achieve an end result that evolution never at any stage envisaged. The long-distance flight would be useless without the navigation; the navigation would be worthless without the flight – and so on. Every aspect of the godwit is purposeful – it speaks to us of mind, of planning and intention.

The godwit is a miracle. God designed it, in the words of Genesis, to ‘fly above the earth across the expanse of the sky’. The ten million or so other species of life on this planet, including ourselves, are all miracles. ‘There are two ways of living one’s life’ Albert Einstein is reported as saying. ‘One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.’ That is the choice we must make for ourselves, regardless of the spirit of our age. The evidence for God’s design is all around us, and increases with every advance of science.

The first and greatest miracle of design is the Creation. The German astronomer Johannes Kepler famously described his research as ‘thinking God’s thoughts after him’. The creation of the cosmos was the realisation of the thoughts of the Creator, His intentions, His glory, His almighty power and wisdom. We are His creatures, designed ‘in His image’ (Genesis 1:27) and part of a ‘grand design’ which has still to be completed – a ‘new creation’ which will repair and renew this troubled earth.

Perhaps that seems impossibly remote from your present experience. But maybe to a godwit, New Zealand seems a long way from Alaska.

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Repentance and baptism

‘Sin’ is an old-fashioned word.

Many people treat the word rather lightly, often with a sense of amusement when others talk about it, because it does depend upon the standards which we adopt. What may be considered wrong, or a sin to one person, may not be so to another.

By what standard then should sin be measured? There can be only one measure – God who created us in the first place has set the standard. His Word the Bible distinguishes between right and wrong. Set against Bible standards, humanity in general falls far short of the standard that God requires, in order that a man or woman may be accepted by Him.

The origin of sin

If we are to find a way out of our present state as sinners, we need to understand why we are in this predicament. The Bible tells us that sin is disobedience of God’s law. It also tells us that all have sinned – except one man Jesus, who was the sinless Son of God. We are also left in no doubt about the origin of sin. The root cause of sin is found in the first

book of the Bible. Many Christians regard the book of Genesis as myth or allegory – but it gives us the only logical explanation of the origin of sin and why we die. Jesus himself endorsed the book of Genesis, and if we are to be counted among his followers, we must first understand and believe the fundamental truths about our existence.

Our first parents had both been given ample evidence of God’s love and care for them and, apart from one prohibition, everything was theirs to enjoy. The test of their characters came in this simple command: ‘*you shall not eat*’ of this one tree (Genesis 2:16,17). But they did eat of its fruit! As a result of their disobedience sin entered the world, as Paul explains in the New Testament: ‘*...just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned*’ (Romans 5:12). These words of Paul set out the Bible’s clear teaching about the seriousness of the human predicament which affects us all.

We cannot argue that Adam and Eve did not understand what God required. They both understood the command and fell short of the standard set by God. To use a modern expression, they crossed 'a red line' and by their transgression brought sin into the world, followed by death as the consequence of their sin. Naturally speaking we are all in the same state as our first parents – we are sinners – and with the same prospect as they had. Those words of the Apostle Paul above confirm the reality of our true state, which all men and women have been subject to from the beginning.

An appeal to repentance

Is there any escape from this seemingly hopeless situation? The answer is 'yes' and it's through the forgiveness of our sins. How can we obtain forgiveness? The answer is through repentance. The Apostle Peter addressed a large crowd assembled in Jerusalem who, when they had heard his message about the mission of Jesus Christ *'they were cut to the heart'* and they asked: *'what shall we do?'* (Acts 2:37). Without hesitation Peter gave them this answer: *'Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins...'* (Acts 2:38).

In New Testament Greek, the word used for repentance means to change one's mind or purpose. It implies a change for the better by believing what God has told us in His Word the Bible and acting on that belief by changing our way of life. It's the first step on that path to escape the finality of death – and the next step is baptism. There is no question about the need for baptism – it is re-enforced by the teaching and example of Jesus and his immediate disciples. Repentance and baptism are first mentioned in Matthew's gospel record, where we read about the work of John the Baptist:

'In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand..."'. Then Jerusalem and all Judea... went out to him and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins.'

Matthew 3:1-2; 5-6

The need for baptism

Jesus himself was baptised by John and this simple act that Jesus undertook *'to fulfil all righteousness'* (Matthew 3:15), gives us an indication of the importance Jesus himself placed on it. This is later confirmed by Jesus' instructions to

his disciples just before his ascension into heaven:

‘...he (Jesus) said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel (good news) to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned”.’

Mark 16:15-16

Therefore, if Jesus himself placed such importance on belief followed by baptism, we should look carefully at what it means to be baptised into the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. We must decide if it is important to us as well, 2,000 years after Jesus gave those instructions to his disciples. Those who believed were baptised only after understanding the gospel or good news about the coming Kingdom of God (see article on page 14).

The Bible calls this process repentance. It’s a **complete change of direction** – a new way of life – a change from pleasing ourselves to trying to please God in our lives and obey His commandments.

The Ethiopian eunuch

In ‘The Acts of the Apostles’ we can read about the work of those who followed Jesus’ instructions to preach the Gospel. For example, in Acts chapter eight, we read about an Ethiopian eunuch, whose response to the message is a demonstration of true repentance. He had been reading a passage from the Old Testament book of the prophet Isaiah but did not understand its meaning. The result was that:

Repentance means a complete change of direction in our lives



‘...Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him. Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, “See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?” Then Philip said, “If you believe with all your heart, you may.” And he answered and said, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God”.’

Acts 8:35–37

It was only then that he and Philip went down into the water and the Ethiopian was baptised, after Philip had first heard his declaration of faith and belief of the Gospel.

The importance of baptism

Now perhaps we can see the importance of baptism; by being baptised in the name of Jesus Christ we can obtain forgiveness of sins. We identify ourselves with the saving work of Jesus and become related to him. Paul shows us the significance of this relationship through baptism in his letter to the early Christians in Rome:

‘...don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised

from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.’

Romans 6:3–4 NIV

Jesus lived a sinless life – the only member of the human race to have achieved the perfection of character that is so pleasing to God. His victory over sin and death, and the hope of eternal life he offers to all, can only become a reality through association with him in baptism. In the same way that Jesus died and rose again from the dead, by undergoing a baptism of total immersion, in effect we must ‘die’ and rise also to a new life. Baptism is a symbolic burial and resurrection to a new way of life. Paul continues in the letter to the Romans:

‘If we have been united with him (Jesus) like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin – because anyone who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him’

Romans 6:5–8 NIV

Baptism is also a symbolic washing. In recounting his dramatic con-

version on the road to Damascus and his subsequent meeting with the disciple Ananias, Paul was told: *‘And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away...’* (Acts 22:16 NIV). The washing away of sins is therefore identified with baptism. *Paul wrote to the believers at Corinth: ‘But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ...’* (1 Corinthians 6:11 NIV).

Perhaps you can see from these verses that anything other than total immersion in water is not baptism in the way required by God and is totally ineffective.

What does baptism achieve?

We have already seen that belief is essential before baptism, but there must also be a change of heart. Before being baptised, believers must recognize that their lives up to that point had been in service to the natural self with its human desires and selfishness. Repentance is a change of mind, a new determination not to serve sin but to serve God, as Paul wrote to the Romans:

‘Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires... but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who

have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of unrighteousness.’ Romans 6:12,13 NIV

The result of this change is made clear by the Apostle Paul:

‘But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.’

Romans 6:22,23 NIV

Is baptism essential?

It may be argued that there are many people in the world who are living upright, generous, selfless and God-fearing lives. Therefore, repentance and baptism are not necessary for them. However, the Bible’s teaching is uncompromising – the only way to salvation is through baptism. The book of Acts tells us about Cornelius, a Roman Centurion, a man who had these characteristics: *‘He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly’* (Acts 10:2 NIV). One day an angel appeared to Cornelius while he prayed and instructed him to send for the Apostle Peter, as his prayers and gifts to the poor had been remembered by God.



The Roman centurion was used to being in command. But Cornelius had no hesitation in submitting to the command to be baptised

Peter, on arriving at his house, preached the gospel to all his household, concluding with these important words: *'All the prophets testify about him (Jesus) that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name...Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water?'* (Acts 10.43,47 NIV).

Cornelius and all his family were then baptised, possibly the first Gentiles (non-Jews) to do so. So even though God had heard his prayers and noticed his treatment of the poor, it was insufficient. God required him to be baptised to receive the opportunity of the salvation that God offers to all.

The lesson of Naaman the Syrian

In the Old Testament there is a telling story about a Syrian army commander. As this man Naaman found out, God doesn't demand any great act of us, simply obedience. The Second Book of Kings records how Naaman suffered from leprosy and, at the suggestion of an Israelite slave girl, he approached the prophet Elisha to be cured. The prophet sent a messenger to tell Naaman to wash in the River Jordan seven times.

Naaman was furious, for the prophet had not recognized his importance and had not come in person. Fortunately, his servants persuaded him to repent – to think again. Naaman took their advice and washed in the river as instructed and was immediately healed (See 2 Kings chapter 5). And that is the lesson of baptism – it needs humility to obey this simple command – but there is

no other way if we wish to associate ourselves with the saving work of Jesus, and to have the opportunity to receive the gift of eternal life.

We all have to make choices as we go through life. If we wish to escape the clutches of **sin** we also have a choice. Believe what God has told us in His Word the Bible and have faith in His saving grace (see Ephesians 2: 8 and article on page 3). Be obedient to the Divine command – repent and change our way of life – be baptised and live our lives in service to God. So, it does matter what we believe about baptism – in fact we could say it's a matter of life or death!

There are two choices, as the Apostle Paul reminded the believers at Rome: '... the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Romans 6:23).

Which choice will you make?

Colin Dryland
London, UK



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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.

We believe that over the centuries the original message of Christianity has been corrupted. Light is published to provide a better understanding of the true Christian hope.

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

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A large, detailed image of a human hand, palm facing up, holding a map of the Middle East. The map is color-coded with greens for land and blues for water, and shows topographical features like mountains and rivers. The hand is positioned against a solid black background, with the fingers slightly curled around the edges of the map.

The Middle East *is it out of control?*

see 'Signs of the Times' article in this edition page 7