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Thus saith the LORD, Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches: But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth Me, that I am the LORD which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the LORD. (Jeremiah 9:23-24)



From the Editor's Desk

Overcoming the Enemy

"For in that He himself hath suffered being tempted, He is able to succour them that are tempted"

(Hebrews 2:18)

Satan tempted Adam and Eve and brought sin into the world. He vexed Job, deceived David and attacked Peter. The first event in our Lord's ministry which is recorded in Matthew's Gospel after His baptism, is His temptation. He attacked Jesus Christ Himself; He was not afraid to assault the Son of God. Three times we read that He was "tempted of the devil" (Matt. 4:1-11). The Bible calls him a "murderer", and "liar", a "roaring lion" (John 8:44; 1Pet. 5:8). The old serpent has 6,000 years of experience and you will not escape his temptation, dear Christian reader. His cunning deception and subtle devices pass man's understanding as he often appears as "an angel of light" (2Cor. 11:14). We must crucify the flesh and overcome the world. These are devices which the devil can use. We must watch and pray daily against his devices.

There is no enemy more dangerous that the foe that we cannot see, the adversary who never sleeps, the traitor who never dies, who is always present wherever we live and goes with us wherever we go. We are tempted to wrong thoughts, foolish talk, doubts, questions and sinful imaginations which rob our peace, destroy our comfort and spoil our fellowship with Christ who suffered Himself being tempted.

"The prince of this world cometh, and hath nothing in Me" (John 14:30). The Lord could not sin. He was purity amid sin. Sin was repugnant and hateful to Him. This made His suffering the more painful to Him, even unto death. The underlying thought of temptation is piercing, discovering the pertinence to ascertain

the character. He endured trial of soul, sorrow, grief, poverty and pain. He was misrepresented, misunderstood, mocked and maligned. This is not just incarnation. The Lord will be with us in all the circumstances of trials and sufferings. The attack is upon all that is Godly in the believer's life. "He was in all points apart from sin, tempted as we are". We have a great High Priest through whom we are drawn near with boldness, to come without fear, in prayers, to "the Throne of Grace" (Heb. 4:15-16).

When He was tempted, He left us an example of how to use the weapon that He used Himself. "It is written" (Matt. 4:4). "It is written again" (Matt. 4:7). "Get thee hence, Satan, for it is written" (Matt. 4:10). Three times the enemy attacked, three times his offer was refused; three times the Lord quoted verses from the Book of Deuteronomy. The Word of God is the Sword of the Spirit. Our weakness is that there is not enough reading of the Scriptures among us. We must be diligent readers of our Bibles.

It is not sufficient to have the Book; we must systematically, diligently, consistently read it, mark its verses, digest it as our daily food, let it lead us in the paths of truth. It is not just to be read at meeting time, and then left aside in our houses. We must be obedient to the Word, practise its principles, follow its text. It will cost us time and trouble by close, regular, daily, attentive reading to have its texts stored in our memories, coming readily to our minds, filling our hearts that we may be prepared when we are faced with temptation, "to stand against the wiles (schemes) of the devil" (Eph. 6:11).

"He is able to succour them that are tempted". He is "touched with the feeling of our infirmities" (Heb. 4:15). He can sympathise, suffer with, undergo along with, He will run alongside the believer who desires to live to please God. He can sympathise when we are down and succour to lift us up.

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The Prophetic Page

"THINGS WHICH MUST SHORTLY COME TO PASS"

(Revelation 1:1)

"In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye" (1Cor. 15:52)

This event is INSTANTANEOUS, IMPERITATIVE AND IMMINENT. There is nothing in God's prophetic programme to hold it back. This "moment", known only to God Himself, could be fulfilled at any time. There is nothing more to be fulfilled before it happens. The only delay to this fulfilment is God's longsuffering. "The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (2Pet. 3:9). Peter is writing about conditions in "the last days"; the coming "Day of the Lord": "the day of judgement and perdition of ungodly men" (2Pet. 3:3-10). This cannot happen until the church is raptured and the saints of this age of Grace are called away from the coming Great Tribulation. In this, believers can join in patient prayer for loved ones still unsaved.

The subject of 1Corinthians chapter 15, is the Resurrection of the Body. It answers the false teaching of some in verse 12, "Now if Christ be preached that He rose from the dead, how say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead?" The Corinthian believers were not denying the Resurrection of Christ. The chapter commences with the fundamental truths of the Gospel which had been preached unto them: "How that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; And that He was buried, and that HE ROSE AGAIN the third day, according to the Scriptures" (vs. 3-4). No one could possibly be saved unless they believe that Christ died and ROSE AGAIN! Some at Corinth were denying the resurrection of the body of the saints that were already dead, at the Rapture. By this error they were unwittingly reflecting upon the power of Christ and His resurrection.

First Corinthians begins with the facts of the Gospel (1:18): chapter 15 again states the foundational truths of the Gospel. The testimony of the Gospel is the last doctrinal truth to be dealt with in this Epistle.

"But some man will say, 'How are the dead raised up? And with what body do they come'" (v35). These two questions are answered in the chapter summarised as follows:

THE MESSAGE (vs. 1-11) – "He rose again".

THE MISERY (vs. 12-19) – "If Christ be not raised … we are of all men most miserable.

THE MANNER (vs. 20-34) – "Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's at His coming".

THE MEANS (vs. 35-50) – "It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption".

THE MOMENT (vs. 51-58) – "In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye".

First Corinthians chapter 15 lists sevenfold consequences since Christ has risen.

1. THE FIRSTFRUITS OF THE DEAD, "the firstfruits of them that slept" (v20). Christ in His death at Calvary, is the corn of wheat. As the sheaf of firstfruits, He guarantees the great Harvest. He is the Forerunner, the Leader, His was the First Body to enter heaven.

2. THE FALL IS REVERSED. "As in Adam all die, even so in Christ is Christ shall all be made alive" (v22). Others have risen to die again. Christ is the Pattern, Proof, Pledge of the resurrection out from among the dead. Adam had headship of all of the old creation. As in the Adam family, "all" die (Gen. 2:17). So, in the Christ family, "all believers" shall be made alive.

3. THE FORESHADOWING OF HIS COMING. "Every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's at His coming" (v23). This is a military term, each man in his own detachment, company or rank. There will not be a general resurrection. God has His own time, His programme of resurrection. When Christ appears, He will have the place of priority and pre-eminence. He will be the Precursor in the Divine programme. He has risen in the power of an endless life.

4. THE FORETELLING OF HIS KINGDOM. "Then cometh the end, when He shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have put down all rule and all authority and power" (v24). At "the end" of God's prophetic programme, the final purpose when He shall have abolished, rendered inoperative, all forms of opposition, "rule" human, "authority", form of government; "power" human or Satanic. When all rebellion shall have been put down, Satan will be in the lake of fire, Christ will hand over the Millennial Kingdom to God.

5. THE FORETASTE OF HIS RULE. "He must reign" (v25). Christ who must suffer, must rise and must also reign, till He hath put all enemies under His feet.

"Jesus shall reign where'er the Sun
Doth his successive journeys run;
His kingdom stretch from shore to shore
Till moon shall wax and wane no more".

Isaac Watts (1674-1748)

6. THE FOE SHALL BE DESTROYED. "The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death" (v26). The "enemy" which claims the bodies of men is an active foe. It will be annulled and rendered powerless. Presently death can be resisted by no man. Paul has established the ground on which he can answer the questions of chapter 15 verse 35. After the Rapture, death will be able to touch no child of God, even giving "victory" (v57), to those saints whose bodies already lie in the grave.

7. THE FINAL SUBJECTION OF ALL THINGS TO GOD. "For He (God) hath put all things under His (Christ's) feet … when all things shall be subdued unto Him (Christ the Son), then shall the Son also Himself be subject unto Him (God) that put all things under Him (Christ), that God may be all in all" (vs. 27-28). God the Father, has found infinite delight and eternal satisfaction in the voluntary subjection of the Son. The mediatorial kingdom of Christ being terminated, the Son will withdraw His outward display of His thousand

year reign on earth, since there will be no opposition to the supremacy of God, there will remain nothing requiring subjection.

Having established the necessity and certainty of resurrection in chapter 15:1-34, Paul now answers the questions "How" are the dead bodies of the believers raised and "What" form will the raised body take (vs. 35-50). He discusses the similitudes of resurrection in botanical, agricultural, zoological and astronomical bodies of the natural realm to confound the sceptics who question what kind of body comes from dead decomposed corruption. He shows that there is an organic identity between the body as it is buried and the body raised but the two bodies are enormously different. God is the God of Life, of abundance and of variety. The body will be changed from corruption to incorruption, from dishonour to glory, from weakness to power. It is sown a natural body, earthly, physical, of five senses. It will be raised a spiritual body (not ethereal), expressing the life of the Holy Spirit fitted from heaven, service, worship and praise with no hindrance. When Christ arose, He passed out of the tomb. He did not disturb the grave clothes or the stone. We shall not disturb the soil if buried and be translated if still alive when he comes.

"Behold, I shew you a mystery" (v51). The "mystery" is knowledge revealed by God when He chooses to make it known. The mystery is not resurrection (a Scriptural truth well known) but the fact that <u>not</u> all believers will die. It is the glorious transformation of the body of both the dead and the living. This "change" will take place at the Rapture. Transformation (not translation) explains "how" such a corrupt mortal body can and will inherit the Kingdom of God.

"We shall not all sleep (victory over death and decay), but we shall all be changed" (v51). This is not the reassembled former body nor the resuscitation of this body. It is not the resumption of material existence but the transformation for the natural body to immortal life. The change from the "earthy" to the "heavenly", from "corruptible" flesh and blood to "incorruption". This will be instantaneous, just here and then gone in the flutter of an eyelid. The last sound we shall hear on earth will be "the trumpet". It will be the "last" in time concluding the church period on earth. "The trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible"; in the new clothing of incorruptibility; "we shall be changed" (v52), repeated for emphasis. "We", Paul includes himself with those who will be living. The writers of the New Testament always spoke of the Lord coming for His church as imminent.

"When the trumpet of the Lord shall sound and time shall be no more,
And the morning break eternal, bright and fair;
When the saved of earth shall gather over on the other shore,
And the roll is called up yonder, I'll be there."

James M. Black (1856-1938)

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Daniel – Conflicts

Chapter 11

(All quotations are from Daniel Chapter 11, unless otherwise stated)

Introduction

The details of Daniel's final vision are brought before us in chapters 11 and 12 of the prophecy. Throughout these two chapters we see conflict, tribulation and suffering. Daniel was shown by Gabriel of conflict in the *heavens* (10:13); here in chapter 11 the conflict is on *Earth* between Gentile nations (vs. 1-35) and ultimately in a future day the climax of all conflict will be in the *Tribulation* period (11:36-12:13). Yet we are

assured by the end of the prophecy that everything is known to God, conflict will ultimately cease and rest is assured (12:13). Our God is in control!

Prophetic Accuracy

Daniel chapter 11 reveals one of the most amazingly detailed and precise prophetic records of the exploits of the major world powers that were prominent at that time. All of the initial aspects of this prophecy have been proved historically accurate. This reveals to us that the course of human history is completely under God's direction. The accuracy of the fulfilled section of the prophecy of chapter 11 gives us renewed confidence (if we needed it) of the accuracy of the yet still unfulfilled section of the prophecy and, indeed, in the Divine inspiration of Scripture generally!

Chapter Division

Daniel's previous dreams/visions all contained images that needed interpretation, e.g. the dream image in chapter 2, the writing on the wall in chapter 5, the vision of the four great beasts in chapter 7, the vision of the Ram and the He-Goat in chapter 8, and finally the vision of the 70 weeks in chapter 9. This last vision is different, however, as just *words* and not *images* are given to Daniel!

Chapter 11 can be divided into three unequal parts:

- Verses 1-4 – Four Persian kings followed by the Grecian Empire and its ultimate splitting-up.
- Verses 5-35 – The continuing conflicts between the King of the North and the King of the South with Israel affected in-between. Specific reference is given to the wicked Antiochus Epiphanes (vs. 21-35).
- Verses 36-49 (and also Ch. 12) – The revealing of the "wilful" king and subsequent events in the Tribulation period.

Clearly, the events of verses 1-35 are historical having already taken place, but the events of verse 36 onwards are still future, yet to be fulfilled prophecy!

Persia and Greece (vs. 1-4)

We have already seen in previous articles that the Perso-Mede and Grecian Empires were spoken of in chapter 8 as the Ram and the He-Goat. These opening verses give us a little more detail of these empires. We are told of three succeeding kings after Cyrus, and then a fourth king who would be richer than them all (v2). Secular history has shown that the three kings succeeding Cyrus were Ahasuerus, Artaxerxes and Darius (see also Ezra 4:5-6). It is well documented that Xerxes, the fourth king, was by far the richest Persian king. He fought against the Greeks and was defeated at the battle of Thermopylae. After this the Persian Empire declined and was ultimately succeeded by Alexander the Great and the Greek Empire (v3). As we have already seen, this great commander (Alexander) died aged 32, after seven to eight years of one of the greatest military conquests in human history! His vast empire was subsequently divided up into four weaker parts (v4) between his four generals!

The Relevance of Persia and Greece

Each of these two empires tried *at some stage* to wipe-out the people of God. With the Persian Empire in the reign of Xerxes we see the evil plot of Haman (the book of Esther). Regarding the Greek Empire, after its four-fold sub-division subsequent to Alexander's death, we see an evil tyrant appearing at a later stage in one of the empires sub-divisions. Antiochus Epiphanes attempted to kill every Jew who would not renounce their commitment to God and embrace the Greek culture. Alexander the Great himself, although a worldly, immoral man, did no *specific* harm to Jerusalem or to God's people.

The Kings of the North and the South (vs. 5-35)

After the death of Alexander the Great, the Greek Empire was divided into four parts, each division being under the authority of one of Alexander's four generals. Two of these divisions became dominant as the King of the North (Syria) and the King of the South (Egypt). There was continual conflict between these two for over 200 years, with Israel being affected because of being between them both! The majority of chapter 11 (vs. 5-35) really brings before us the wars, exploits, marriages, alliances, intrigues and fluctuating

fortunes of these two powers. These particular verses bring before us the most detailed accounts of secular history ever revealed, all of which have been accurately and specifically enacted and providing evidence of the absolute Divine inspiration of Scripture.

Antiochus Epiphanes (vs. 21-35)

The family of Seleucus, one of Alexander's generals, had ruled the Northern kingdom (Syria) for about 150 years when, in 176BC, the infamous, corrupt, vile Antiochus Epiphanes took over that kingdom by deceit and great force, suppressing all opposition (vs. 21-23). As well as a number of conflicts with the Southern kingdom (Egypt), this evil man was noted for his hatred of the Jews. He committed severe atrocities against God's people, desecrated and robbed the Temple and stopped Temple worship! (v31). Faithful Jews under Judas Maccabees resisted for almost 100 years. What has been recorded of Antiochus Epiphanes has been *historically fulfilled*, yet what was true of Antiochus (the daily sacrifice being taken away … the abomination of desolation, v31) was really an *historical foreshadowing* of the activities of a far more evil, far more powerful personage yet to be manifested on the world scene in the Tribulation period! (see Dan. 12:11). So, in the details given of this historical Antiochus we see the actions of an evil man, yet just a pre-figure of the ultimate evil man!!

The Wilful King/The Beast (vs. 36-45)

His Character (vs. 36-39) – We are introduced to another king (v36) who is neither the King of the North nor the King of the South, for there is conflict between this *new* king and these other two kings (v40). We believe that at this point in the prophecy we are projected into the distant future of events still yet to be fulfilled in the Tribulation period!

This still to be revealed personage is self-willed (ignoring everything and everyone), self-exalting and self-magnifying. He is a gifted orator and all that he demands seems to prosper (v36). This satanically inspired autocrat rejects the "*God of his fathers*", indicating that he *may* be a Jew. He has no natural physical attraction to women and no regard for any god (v37).

His Conflict (vs. 40-45) – These closing verses of chapter 11 are a *very brief* summary of future conflicts in the Tribulation period concerning this evil person! He certainly has Beast-like/Antichrist characteristics (see Rev. 13:1-18). Just a word of caution is required here – in 1John 2:18 John speaks of "*the antichrist*", but he doesn't give more details and doesn't say which of these two beasts of Revelation 13 he is referring to! Whoever it is, the covenant to protect God's people, signed at the beginning of the Tribulation period, will be broken at the mid-point of these 7 years; the Temple will be desecrated, there will be the immediate cessation of sacrifices and the image introduced into the Holy Place. Thence will begin the command for universal worship of the Beast.

Great conflicts will take place in the North and in the South of the "Holy Land". On hearing of activity in the North and in the East that troubles him (v44; See Rev. 16:12 – the Euphrates dries-up and the subsequent movements of the Kings of the East), he will head to Jerusalem to make his headquarters (v45). The final conflict involving all nations from all directions at Megiddo (in the valley of Jezreel) will take place – Armageddon! Then, finally, the second coming of Christ in power and glory will occur (Zech. 14:4). The fate of this "wilful" king is assured!! (Rev. 19). For greater depth on these matters the reader is encouraged to read through Revelation chapters 6-19.

Conclusion

This final vision revealed to Daniel continues into chapter 12, where we are given some very specific time markers of events in the yet-to-be Tribulation period. The evil, historical Antiochus was just a mere foreshadow of the utterly contemptible, prophetical Antichrist. The one died almost 2,200 years ago, the other *may* be alive on Earth at present! Either way we, as believers, will never meet either; the one is long gone dead and when the other is at the height of his evil activity we will have been taken-up (the Rapture) into Heaven! Praise God!

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The Acts of the Apostles
Chapter 17:10-17

Believers at Berea (v.10-12)

Following the judicial proceedings imposing "security" on Jason, and presumably the others as part of the terms of their release, it was necessary that Paul and Silas would leave Thessalonica and not return. So having left Philippi after an unjust Court appearance, a severe beating and an uncomfortable night in prison, Paul and Silas are now effectively expelled from Thessalonica following another public demonstration and a Court appearance by some of their converts. This must have been very discouraging as it represented great hostility in the first two cities visited in Europe after receiving the confirmatory vision (Acts 16:9). However, in both Philippi and Thessalonica an assembly of believers were established to whom Paul sent a letter to the Philippians and two letters to the Thessalonians, from which great benefit is derived to this very day. So what might at first appear to be serious setbacks, and we should not minimise the immediate impact of the circumstances, resulted in greater spiritual benefit to believers living then and all who have lived subsequently until now.

So "the brethren immediately sent away Paul and Silas by night unto Berea". Smuggling them out under cover of darkness, they travel some 50 miles in a south westerly direction to Berea. It is no longer Jews and Gentiles, but "brethren", a word used 24 times by Paul in 1 and 2 Thessalonians, indicating that salvation had created a new brotherhood to replace former ethnic and religious differences. It is possible that Timothy also left Thessalonica at the same time as he also appears at Berea (Acts 17:14) unless he left that city later to rejoin the others. Berea is not on the Egnatian Way and so it is therefore an "out of the way" place; hence very suitable for the purpose of allowing public uproar to subside. So another beneficial consequence of persecution is that the Gospel was preached in places it might not otherwise have reached. We recall that following persecution in Iconium (Acts 14:5), the Gospel was preached in Lystra and after persecution there (Acts 14:19), the Gospel was taken to Derbe, similarly "out of the way" places.

Paul and Silas were undeterred by persecution: "who coming thither went into the synagogue of the Jews" at Berea. The record of Scripture about the Berean Jews is "these were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind". They were more open minded and free from prejudice, which are noble qualities. They were willing and eager listeners with an amenable and generous disposition. No doubt Paul would appeal to the same Old Testament passages as he had at Thessalonica, but there is no mention of debate and disputation at Berea. No names are given here, but would surely include Sopater (Acts 20:4).

This openness of character is manifested by their activity, they "searched the Scriptures daily, whether those things were so". The Bereans were not slaves to Jewish prejudice and therefore examined the Scriptures every day, possibly meeting with Paul on a daily basis rather than weekly as was the case at Thessalonica. "Examine" is the word frequently used in relation to judicial scrutiny or investigations; therefore, they are examining and weighing up the evidence with impartial care. They are neither naive nor gullible, but are receptive to the Gospel message after checking out the things preached. They demonstrate integrity in their approach to the meaning of the Scriptures, setting aside any Jewish bias. They read and searched their Bibles daily, which provides us with a good example to follow: they could say "I have esteemed the words of His mouth more than my necessary food" (Job 23:12).

The result was "therefore many of them believed; also of honourable women which were Greeks, and of men, not a few". The "many of them that believed" relates to the Jews. They believed because they accepted fully the testimony of Scripture; true faith is nurtured by the Word of God. However, the response to the Scriptures was not unanimous; there was a division as "many believed", not all. Also prominent Greek women of the wealthier class and even more Greek men believed. It is not clear whether these were God-fearers attached to the synagogue; or if they were from a pagan or heathen background.

Trouble from Thessalonica (v.13)

Wherever the Gospel prospers we can be sure there will be Satanic opposition, and so it was here: "But when the Jews of Thessalonica had knowledge that the word of God was preached of Paul at Berea, they came thither also, and stirred up the people". These Thessalonian agitators played the same part as the Jews of Pisidian Antioch and Iconium had at Lystra (Acts 14:19). The opposition came from the place last visited by Paul to ferment opposition to the Gospel here in Berea. Not only did they not want to know or believe the Gospel themselves, but in active opposition they wished to deny anyone else having opportunity of hearing the message! These religious troublemakers travelled some 50 miles to oppose the preachers and challenge the message. That raises a serious question for believers as to what distance they are prepared to go to spread the message and support the preaching?

Onward again (v.14,15)

The outcome of the agitation from Jewish zealots was "then immediately the brethren sent away Paul to go as it were to the sea". The Berean believers did not risk repeating a public furore and sent Paul off to the coast. He was evidently the chief focus of Jewish hostility as "Silas and Timotheus abode there still", that is, for the time being at Berea.

"And they that conducted Paul brought him unto Athens". If this was by sea, it would involve a voyage of 300 miles. Yet Luke usually identifies the port of embarkation so a greater part of the journey may have been overland. Anyhow, Paul now arrives at what was the foremost Greek city state since the 5th century BC and presently a free city within the Roman Empire. The Gospel now enters the intellectual, philosophical and cultural metropolis of the world, not with oratory, intellectual apologetics, or debating skills. Rather the Gospel's introduction to Athens was represented by one man who had experienced much opposition, persecution, pain and discomfort on his journey to bring that message. Hardly an arrival to impress the superior attitude of the Athenians!

Paul's first action on reaching Athens was to advise Silas and Timothy of his location and give instructions for them to join him. The Acts of the Apostles doesn't mention Silas and Timothy again until they both later join Paul at Corinth, having come from Macedonia (the region where Thessalonica and Berea were located, Acts 18:5). However, 1Thessalonians chapter 3 indicates that Timothy at least had joined Paul at Athens. However, such was Paul's concern for the wellbeing of the Thessalonian assembly and believers that he "thought it good to be left at Athens alone" and sent Timothy back to Thessalonica "to establish you, and to comfort you concerning your faith: That no man should be moved by these afflictions: for yourselves know that we are appointed thereunto" (1Thess. 3:1-3).

This is another indication of the shepherd care of this Apostle who would later write to the Corinthians, "beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches" (2Cor. 11:28).

Activity at Athens (v.16,17)

While Paul was waiting for Silas and Timothy to come to him at Athens, the cradle of democracy, he was not inactive. Although Athens was past the zenith of its prestige and influence, it was still a city of political, educational and architectural splendour. Although Paul was not visiting as a tourist and the aspect of Athens that attracted his attention was the universal evidence of idolatry.

As he observed the city and its citizens Paul's "spirit was stirred in him". His feelings were aroused into a continuous, settled reaction to the very public manifestations of idol worship that he saw. He was therefore greatly distressed, irritated, provoked, roused to indignation. We must remember that idolatry always provoked God to anger as He was jealous of this illegitimate intrusion into the realm of worship, which is due to Him alone! The first commandment is, "Thou shalt have no other gods before Me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God…" (Exod. 20:3-5). Hence Paul was similarly revolted and grieved by idolatry.

Paul "saw the city wholly given to idolatry". He was not stirred by the architecture, history, wisdom, politics, culture or literature of Athens. Whatever was its beauty or brilliance as assessed by men, Paul saw it as a city full or swamped by idols. There were statues and shrines everywhere, with every public building being dedicated to some god or goddess. Thus the most progressive, enlightened, cultured, society in Europe at that time had become "vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, And changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image…" (Rom. 1:21-23). However, it wasn't that they only worshipped one false god as did the heathen nations in the Old Testament, which was ever a snare to Israel and Judah: Athens worshipped a vast array of gods and goddesses around which was developed elaborate myths since enshrined in classical literature and studied in universities to this day!

Such blatant idolatry provoked a reaction on the part of the Apostle; and we should not be indifferent either! However, that reaction has to be channelled aright and this passage provides witness to what activity is legitimate today in this age of grace. Paul could not, and did not, rest indifferent to Athens' need of the Gospel. His reaction to idolatry led to a wise yet positive and constructive witness to the truth: "Therefore disputed he in the synagogue with the Jews, and with the devout persons [Gentiles], and in the market daily with them that met with him".

Again, Paul is reasoning about the Christ of Scripture and the Jesus of history, according "as his manner was" (Acts 17:2). So he spoke indoors in the synagogue on the Sabbath and outdoors for the other days of the week in the Agora, which was both market place and centre of Athenian public life. There, possibly in a question and answer style of dialogue rather than by preaching a message, he engages with those in this public place who care to listen. This style of engagement with people was only appropriate in Athens with its history of public discourse. One thing is clear, that Paul's interaction with the Athenians has made the Gospel clearly known, which led to his being taken to the Areopagus where he preached before the philosophers of Athens.

(To be continued D.V.)

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Get to Know Your Bible

OLD TESTAMENT OUTLINE – Paper No 9.

THE BOOK OF JUDGES – Part 1

"Now after the death of Joshua it came to pass, that the children of Israel asked the LORD, saying, 'Who shall go up for us against the Canaanites first, to fight against them?' And the LORD said, 'Judah shall go up: behold I have delivered the land unto his hand" (Judg. 1:1-2). The book of Judges details 13 judges or deliverers raised up from different tribes by God to lead them in the defeat of their enemies and to rule the nation. One man, Abimelech was a self-appointed imposter (Judg. 9:1-6). God also raised up Eli the priest and the godly Samuel, who "judged Israel all the days of his life" (1Sam. 7:15), until He appointed David to be King (1Sam. 16:12-13). Seven judges were used to defeat various enemies who had brought Israel into servitude. In the record of five other judges, no external enemy is mentioned.

After the generation that outlived Joshua, "There arose another generation after them, which knew not the LORD, nor yet the works which He had done for Israel" (Judg. 2:10). National behaviour deteriorated until, "every man did that which was right in his own eyes" (17:6; 21:25). Six times it is recoded that the children of Israel, "did evil in the sight of the LORD" (3:7; 3:12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1). The lessons to be learned even in the assembly today are that danger can be threefold. The danger from the enemy without, that should

have been driven completely out of the land, the departure due to the loss of devotion to the Lord within, and the destruction caused by a man seeking to promote himself over the people, a carnal man seeking position and prepared to defy the Word of God and to divide and destroy the fellowship to achieve his object of lordship over the people of God.

The accounts of the judges are not historically consecutive, some over lapped and not all of them ruled over a united Israel. The seeds of the problems began due to the lack of separation of God's chosen people from the remnants of the idolatrous inhabitants of the land. In spite of early victories, the enemies were not completely driven out from the land. "The LORD was with Judah; and he drave out the inhabitants of the mountain; but could not drive out (a similar expression occurs 10 times in Ch. 1:10-36) the inhabitants of the valley" (1:19). In a short time, the people who had seen the power of God displayed when in dependence, they followed His Word, now mixed and married among the heathen and turned to their gods becoming idolaters, "they forsook the LORD, and served Baal and Ashtaroth" (2:13). The love of God for them had been forgotten, obedience to the Word of God had been forsaken and the power of God, to defeat their enemies, was forfeited.

The judges were raised up by God to lead the nation back to their love for Jehovah and obedience to his Word. None of them were of importance by natural descent or high office among the people. They did not pass their call on to their family when they died. They were raised up individually and enabled by God, in dependence on God when the need was great and when it was God's time to deliver His people. Sin brought Israel into servitude and suffering. The repentance of the people and their cry to God led to salvation and deliverance from their oppressor. Those times of bondage by their enemies, was not due to overwhelming skill in battle or military strategy of their foes. It was the Lord Who delivered them into the hands of their enemy to chasten them of their sinful departure, to reveal their spiritual poverty, to sicken them of idolatry and iniquity, causing them to repent and to cry for deliverance and salvation.

OTHNIEL (3:8-11)

"The LORD raised up a deliverer to the children of Israel, who delivered them, even Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother" (3:9). Othniel had already obtained God's help when he took Kirjath-Sepher (1:12-13). He also married a good wife, who with her husband was exercised about the extension and prosperity of God's inheritance (1:14-15). The Spirit of the Lord came upon Othniel, having had success in a local battle, he "judged Israel", dealt with sin at home and was then victorious in war against the king of Mesopotamia (3:10). This man of spirituality and separation, was strong in the Lord and served his people for forty years, when "the land had rest" (3:11).

Othniel was a true Hebrew. He conquered "the king of Mesopotamia", or king of Aram. This was the place from which Abram was called, by the God of glory to "Get thee out" (Acts 7:3). The early NT command is, "Come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord" (2Cor. 6:17). This king made a long journey to invade Israel. Israel was brought into bondage for eight years. The warning is 'do not mix with the world of darkness, do not bring it in'. We have brought the world in to dominate our homes, our lives, our families and even the assemblies. "Cushan" means "double darkness". "What communion hath light with darkness?" (2Cor. 6:14). "Forty years" in Scripture (mentioned with respect of three of the judges) indicates the period of man's testing. May we pray that God will raise up leaders among His people with Godly influence and ability to teach God's Word to bring about unity and "rest" to withstand the winds of testing that blow across our inheritance in Christ.

EHUD (3:12-30)

"And the children of Israel did evil again in the sight of the LORD" (3:12). This record of departure is repeated (3:7; 3:12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6 and 13:1) until there was no king in Israel and "every man did that which was right in his own eyes" (17:6; 21:25). "And the LORD strengthened Eglon ('a fine bull calf'), the king of Moab against Israel, because they had done evil in the sight of the LORD" (3:12). The cycle of rebellion, servitude, repentance and deliverance begins again. If we live out lives to our own satisfaction, self-indulgence, and disregard of the Word of God, then God will not lower His standard. In every one of us, is

an evil heart of unbelief that departs from God. What lurks within is even more deceptive than that which lures without.

Eglon, the king of Moab; "gathered unto him the children of Ammon and Amalek, and went and smote Israel, and possessed the city of the palm trees" (3:13). Moab, the incestuous son of Lot, began his existence in gross immorality, and though a close relative to Israel, never ceased to be a bitter, bestial, boastful hater of god's people (Isa. 16:6). Ammon descended from the sinful relationship between Lot and his younger daughter and was always marked by cruelty and corruption (Amos 1:13). Amalek, a descendant of Esau (Gen. 36:10-12) was likewise pleased to join this hateful confederacy of Israel's enemies. The Moabites were characterised by pride (Isa. 16:6) and ease (Jer. 48:11). Eglon displayed these national features, "he was sitting in a summer parlour which he had for himself alone" (3:20). This "very fat man" evidently self-centred and self-indulgent is an accurate picture of our ever-present enemy, the flesh. Israel had defeated Moab in battle when they entered the land (Num. 22:1; Josh. 24:9) about 80 years prior to these events. Moab remained a near neighbour, on the border of the land, sometimes hindered but never completely exterminated.

The flesh is opposed to God's will and "cannot please Him" (Rom. 8:8). Such was our state before conversion, controlled and dominated by our sinful nature which was never improved or removed. Paul states, "But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you" (Rom. 8:9). While the flesh is ever present, we "walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit" (Rom. 8:4). Peter warns against "fleshly lusts, which war against the soul" (1Pet. 2:11). Moab is always on the offensive ready to go to war. Moab represents the corruption of the flesh; Ammon, likewise descending from Lot, typifies the cruelty and violence of the flesh (Amos 1:13); Amalek who came from Esau typifying the destructive and profane aspect of the flesh. This trinity of evil and their successors continue to be inveterate enemies of Israel until modern times.

They possessed "the city of the palm trees" (Jericho, 3:13) which was the seat of Israel's first triumph when they had entered the land (Josh. Ch. 6). This would indicate that Elgon had crossed the Jordan to the west bank and set up his headquarters in Jericho, so that the tribe of Reuben had suffered loss of territory even to Gilgal (3:19) with its memories of former victory and the place of the circumcision of the flesh and their first partaking of the old corn of the land (Josh. 5:2-9).

It is so sad to see what havoc the selfishness of the flesh and self-indulgence can work among the people of God. The young believer who sang the song of triumph when the great walls of his unsaved habits fell flat, returning to his smoking or drinking or fleshly habits that enclosed him before salvation: the young couple who began with the vigour of new life and spirituality, being enslaved to the cares of this life by fleshly pride, pleasure and prosperity, building up obstructions to their spiritual development that they conquered at the beginning. Sadder still it is to see the assembly leave their first love to help the enemy to retake territory from which he was once driven out.

Ehud was raised up by God. His name means "joining together". Sin brings in distance resulting in fellowship with God not being enjoyed. A good leader will unite, not divide the people of God, to obey the Word of God. "Ehud the son of Gera, a Benjamite, a man left handed (lit. "shut of his right hand"): and by him the children of Israel sent a present (gift offering) unto Eglon the king of Moab" (3:15). The words seem to suggest that his right hand, whether by paralysis or injury could no longer be used. He was a Benjamite, which means, "Son of my right hand". It is strange that a privileged son of the right hand had lost his natural grip. It was certainly not right, though evidently a diplomat or of high office, that he should be attempting to carry a present, a bribe, perhaps tribute money to the hateful enemy of the people of God. More shameful if it was "a gift offering" as to a godless deity. The thing was so heavy that he needed the help of others to carry in (3:18). He "made him a dagger (sword) which had two edges".

This was a personal exercise of great courage after 18 years of servitude which God allowed to bring in 80 years of deliverance and rest. The practical lesson gives us no difficulty. "The Word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword" (Heb. 4:12). Spiritual victory over the flesh is only won by using the Word of God. It is "the Sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God" (Eph. 6:17). Whatever we

may think about the details of this incident, it teaches that in the private place, we must subdue the flesh, our old sinful nature. Ruthlessly, we must use the Word of God to "mortify" (put to death) our "members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness (filth, dirt), inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry" (Col. 3:5).

SHAMGAR (3:31)

"And after him (Ehud) was Shamgar the son of Anath, which slew of the Philistines six hundred men with an ox goad: and he also delivered Israel". Only one verse is used to record this deliverer of Israel and it is enclosed between two references to Ehud (3:30; 4:1). The king of Moab came from the east. The Philistines came from the west. Shamgar may have worked at the end of the "80 years" rest (3:30), to combat the rising force of the Philistines. It is not necessary to think that he slew six hundred men on one occasion. He used a basic simple instrument readily available from his daily life and work. Othniel was a soldier, Ehud was a diplomat. Othniel used a sword, Ehud used a dagger, Shamgar used an ox goad. The Spirit of God mentions the work of this farm labourer and says, "He also delivered Israel".

Thirteen judges are mentioned in this book. This is the number of 'rebellion', marking the book of Judges as the book of rebellion where there was no King in Israel and every man did that which was right in his own eyes. Among these thirteen judges, there were seven prominent deliverers about whom we are given quite a lot of details. There are six men about whom we know very little, yet they were all equally needed to deliver Israel at the particular times and conditions when God chose to use them. God can raise up mighty men from birth. God can use small unimportant men and make them great men of faith. Amos was a herdsman from Tekoa. Jacob, Moses and David were shepherds though they did not own any sheep themselves. At least seven of the twelve disciples were fishermen. The Lord blessed the provision of a lad with five barley loaves and two small fishes. Shamgar used an ox goad, Samson used the jaw bone of an ass. They both slew the Philistines. We all want to be important in the estimation of others. God can use men little known beyond their own area. Men of self-importance, seeking prominence, often manifest fleshly pride, bring in worldly influence and create trouble. There seems to have been rest in the days of Shamgar. We may not put him on the same platform as Othniel and Ehud but the Scriptures record that he "also" delivered the nation of Israel.

In Divine things shepherding the assembly does not require eloquence, being a youth leader or well educated, a linguist trained in the Bible college, moving in select circles causing division. Shamgar served God and defended the inheritance on the western boundaries where he lived with the simple implement of his every day employment. Be encouraged, dear brother and sister, if you are called to serve your Lord and Saviour, while living in the same house, among the same neighbours, never leaving the district where you have always dwelled, and stedfastly holding the same Scriptural inheritance in the same assembly where you have always been since the day of your salvation.

The "Philistines", descendants of Ham, were evidently in the land before Israel, and were the bitter and persistent enemies of God's people. They filled the wells back in the days of Isaac (Gen. 26:15). They blocked the roads in the times of Shamgar (Judg. 5:6). They occupied the Hill of God in the days of Samuel (1Sam. 10:5). They exploited the weakness of Israel in the reign of Saul (1Sam. 12:23). They were the wicked inhabitants of the land who should have been driven out by Israel (Josh. 13:2) but they were not defeated decisively until David's reign.

The second reference to Shamgar is in Judges 5. "In the days of Shamgar the son of Anath, in the days of Jael, the highways were unoccupied, and the travellers walked through byways" (5:6). These words from the Song of Deborah show that the desire of the Philistines was to generate fear and unease among the people of God so that they had to avoid the main road as they went up to worship, and used the byways to flee from the villages to the fortified cities. The Philistines were blocking the road, they were ambushing the people, they were restricting the liberty of the people of God. Today, the paid pastor system, the clerical system, which is hated by God, is hindering the Lord's dear people. Today, the organisations of men and the systems of Christendom pay the enemies of the assembly of God's people to come between your soul and God. They are Philistines robbing God's people of their liberty to go out in the highways to preach

the Gospel, restricting them to sit silently on their seats, captive in the bondage while being robbed of the function of Spiritual gifts. It is not only our duty to hate such systems as God does, but to drive them out like the faithful Shamgar.

DEBORAH, BARAK and JAEL (4:1-5:31)

Deborah is the only woman to judge Israel. This reveals a sad situation where men were not leading the nation. "And the children of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD, when Ehud was dead. And the LORD sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, that reigned in Hazor; the captain of whose host was Sisera, which dwelt in Harosheth of the Gentiles. And the children of Israel cried unto the LORD: for he had nine hundred chariots of iron; and twenty years he mightily oppressed the children of Israel" (4:1-3). Jabin may have been a title. It means 'discerner', one marked by human intelligence, anxious to obtain knowledge and understanding. This mighty foe, with a great well equipped army under the cunning Sisera and relying on human intellect was defeated in battle by heavenly intervention. "They fought from heaven; the stars in their courses fought against Sisera" (5:20). "And Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lapidoth, she judged Israel at that time" (4:4). The sudden way in which Deborah is introduced into the story of Judges is to be observed. The brief account of her service and song are thought provoking. Her communication of the words of the Lord God of Israel and her prophecy of victory over the enemy are remarkable. This begins in simple narrative in keeping with her domestic circumstances in her own sphere; "she dwelt under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in Mount Ephraim" (4:5).

She was a spiritual woman. She had a knowledge of God's Will and of God's Word. Her exercise was for the deliverance of God's distressed and defeated people. "Hath not the LORD God of Israel commanded" (4:6). She was a godly woman, in touch with God, able to discern the mind and purposes of God. Deborah was not a leader of the nation or a warrior in the battle, but she was a prophetess. She knew the call and challenge of God's Word against the enemy. God used her, in her own sphere to arouse others from lethargy and despair. In fearless devotion to God, seeking the freedom of the nation from bondage and degradation, she rebuked folly and fear among the people. Her words of wisdom and certainty of deliverance, aroused faith in God. "The highways were unoccupied, and the travellers walked through byways. The inhabitants of the villages ceased" (5:6-7). She felt the reproach of this fear, and the dominion of the heathen. "And Deborah said unto Barack, 'Up; for this is the day in which the LORD hath delivered Sisera into thine hand: is not the LORD gone out before thee'?" (4:14). She began in her own heart, "Awake, awake, Deborah … arise, Barack, and lead thy captivity captive" (5:12).

"At that time" (4:4) the people were dejected and afraid; their spirits were broken and the land was ruined and desolate. "The anger of the LORD was hot against Israel" (2:20). Joshua was dead and now the people transgressed the commandment of the Lord and were failing to drive out any more of the idolatrous nations that were left. "They chose new gods; then was war in the gates: was there a shield or spear seen among forty thousand in Israel?" (5:8). At the end of chapter 3, Shamgar slew six hundred of the Philistines with an ox goad (3:31). In agricultural life, he controlled the strong oxen in his plough or cart with an ox goad. Evidently without a sword, he skilfully put the only weapon available to good use. With no royal lineage, no recorded genealogy, God raised up Deborah, the wife of an obscure man, from an unknown humble household in the "hill country" of Ephraim (4:5) (Newbery margin). This reminds us of Elizabeth and her dumb husband in the hill country where they heard the Song of Mary (Luke 1:46-55).

It is to be noted that where God "raised up" deliverers and leaders of the nation, this fact is recorded in these chapters. "And when the children of Israel cried unto the LORD, the LORD raised up a deliverer (Saviour) … who delivered (saved) them, even Othniel" (3:9). "The LORD raised them up a deliverer, Ehud" (3:15). "The angel of the LORD appeared unto Gideon" (6:12). The Scriptures do not say that God raised up Deborah but she was a godly woman whom God used in her own sphere. Some have used these Scriptures to justify the position of women in authority and public ministry which God forbids. Christendom has places led publicly by women. In these charismatic days of compromise and falsehood, some denominations have been formed by women. A godly sister is content to remain silent in the Scriptural assemblies of God's people. "I will therefore that men pray every where, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting. In

like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness (modesty) and sobriety (discretion); not with broided (plaited) hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array; But (which becometh women professing godliness) with good works. Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, not to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence" (1Tim. 2:8-12). A spiritual sister in the assembly will wear, "the (incorruptible) ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price" (1Pet. 3:4).

The secret source of any woman's highest adornment is her trust in God. This Divine grace is diffused in sweet smelling savour in the words of Deborah; "I will sing unto the LORD; I will sing praise to the LORD God of Israel" (5:3).

BARAK – After long slavery and repeated failures, there were great odds against him. "And Barak said unto her, 'If thou wilt go with me, then I will go: but if thou wilt not go with me, then I will not go" (4:8). Barak (not Deborah) is commended in Hebrews chapter 11. He is in the galaxy of those who by faith, "out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens" (Heb. 11:34). The women who are mentioned in Hebrews chapter 11, Sarah and Rahab, cannot be considered to be in the capacity of leadership. Jabin king of Canaan, and Sisera the captain of his host had mightily oppressed the children of Israel for twenty years. To go up against Sisera's army of nine hundred chariots of iron and his multitude of armed men, with only ten thousand lightly armed men from Naphtali and Zebulun seemed foolish. Reuben was divided, Gilead remained beyond Jordan and Asher continued at the sea shore. Barak would be aware that he was about to lead his weak army into battle as they, "jeoparded their lives unto the death in the high places of the field" (5:18).

Deborah encouraged Barak with the words; "Hath not the LORD God of Israel commanded…" (4:6). This seems to imply that God had already commanded Barak what to do, who to bring, where to go, and the plan of attack. She reminded him of God's promises; "I will draw … I will deliver him into thine hand" (4:7). In fact, the battle was over before it started. In reality, "they fought from heaven; the stars in their courses fought against Sisera. The river of Kishon swept them away, that ancient river, the river Kishon" (5:20-21). This may mean, fearful hailstones, blinded by rain or overwhelming waters, like their foes at the Red Sea. Deborah was a courageous woman of faith, a woman that received her convictions from God's Word and communicated those promises to the strength and encouragement of Barak with a specific, thus saith the Lord. She made no attempt to step outside the sphere that God had assigned to her. Barak was to lead God's people; God had not told Deborah to lead the army. She encouraged Barak, stood with him and they sang in victory together (5:1).

Jeremiah asked the question; "Who hath stood in the counsel of the LORD, and perceived and heard His Word? who hath marked His Word, and heard it?" (Jer. 23:18). Deborah was such a prophetess. With her heart fixed on God's Word, she served with vigour to the limit of her ability and capacity. Thank God, for sisters in the domestic sphere who have a clear knowledge of the Scriptures, teach their children from the Bible, and support their husbands in the right ways of the Lord. Even a godly mature sister who is unmarried can in private encourage a young brother who is beginning to take public part in the meetings. Where would we be if the spiritual atmosphere and activities of the assembly were not supported by the prayers and grace of godly women to privately encourage men who may be weak and fearful? An exercised young brother looking for a godly helpmeet for himself, should seek a spiritual sister in the Lord. They should confirm their convictions around the Word of God before committing to marriage.

"She dwelt under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in mount Ephraim: and the children of Israel came up to her for judgement" (4:5). She had no palace or fortress; she was just content to dwell under a palm tree. Samuel went on an annual circuit (1Sam. 7:16). Ehud "blew a trumpet" (3:27). Deborah did not take the initiative but the people, "came to her". She was "a mother in Israel" (5:7). The wayward "children" of Israel were welcomed and counselled in a motherly way, in the paths of faith in God. She was a trusted source of care, concern, support and confident trust in God. Deborah was accepted for forty years by the consent of the people. Jezebel and Athaliah were women who ruled and were hated by the people.

"The palm tree of Deborah", was a cool refreshing oasis in the hot barren desert conditions in Israel at that

time. In its shade, flourished with water, it was fruitful unto old age. "The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree" (Psa. 92:12-15). It was planted near "Bethel", the house of God (4:5). The palm tree can flourish, as did Deborah in the desert. Circumstances in Israel in the days of the Judges were dry, barren, difficult and hard. The palm tree can grow in the sand being nourished from deep roots by hidden springs, to withstand wind and erosion. Deborah was refreshed directly by the Word of God. A bramble grows down, a green bay tree spreads out, but a palm tree grows stately, straight, upward toward the light. Deborah was in touch with "heaven" (5:20). The palm tree is ever green, in winter blasts or summer heat, no dust adheres to its leaf. Its shadow shades, its fruit refreshes, and its presence indicates a watering place. Such was Deborah's palm tree, stable, steady, strong amid weakness and departure.

JAEL – Chapter 4 begins with Deborah, a woman judge who motivated Barak to respond to God's call, and with ten thousand men, he defeated Sisera with all his chariots and all his host till there was "not a man left" (4:16). The chapter ends with Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, ending the life of Sisera, Israel's terrible enemy. Deborah was a prophetess communicating God's promises to weak and vacillatory leadership. Jael was a pilgrim living in a tent as a nomad, the Kenites having separated themselves to dwell in the wilderness of Judah (1:16). Sisera, the cunning strategist, "fled away on his feet" (4:17), from the battle scene, not taking the route directly north through the mountains toward Hazor, but hoping to escape unnoticed, he chose to run eastward through the plain of Esdraelon to get as far away as possible before turning north. The tent of Jael was a welcome sight for the weary wretch to sleep. Only the Sovereign hand of God could guide in the situation so that the supposed place of safety became the place of his death.

Deborah and Barak sang: "Blessed above women shall Jael the wife of Heber the Kenite be, blessed shall she be above women in the tent. He asked water, and she gave him milk; she brought forth butter in a lordly dish. She put her hand to the nail, and her right hand to the workmen's hammer; and with the hammer she smote Sisera, she smote off his head, when she had pierced and stricken through his temples" (5:24-26). Shamgar used an ox goad, Jael used a tent peg, Gideon used lamps, pitchers and trumpets. David refused Saul's armour, but used a sling and a stone. "God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; … the weak things … to confound the things which are mighty … He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord" (1Cor. 1:31). Let us join in the prayer and praise at the end of chapter 5. "So let all thine enemies perish, O LORD: But let them that love Him be as the sun when he goeth forth in his might. And the land had rest forty years" (5:31).

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Christ – The Firstborn

"The Firstborn of every creature … the Firstborn from the dead; that in ALL things He might have the preeminence." (Colossians 1:15,18)

Continuing on from our consideration of Christ as Mary's literal FIRSTBORN son, we shall now consider Him as the FIRSTBORN SON in rank and Preeminence, firstly over Creation and then over Death.

"The FIRSTBORN of Every Creature"

Here is the first of the two great statements concerning Christ as the FIRSTBORN. This describes His relationship to His creation as its Creator, the sustainer of all things and such gives Him Rank, Preeminence and Authority over it, as miraculously seen on so many occasions during His days here in the flesh. He manifested His power then as when He first brought the creation into being with His spoken word. It also emphasis His eternal and unoriginated relationship with the Father, in Whom all His delight and pleasure is found.

Throughout the whole of Scripture we do not find even the slightest suggestion that He was the first created being, through whom God then made the world as many cults insist through their pernicious teaching. They often insert additional words or change meanings to force their false doctrine into verses, so in effect, rewriting the Bible!

Paul apparently had a choice of Greek words to use; notably he did NOT choose '*protoktistos*' (first-created), because it was NOT true! Rather he used '*prototokos*' (firstborn or first-begotten).

But Paul also indicates his true intent in his following statements as to why the Lord Jesus has the preeminence over all creation:

> "For by Him were ALL things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: ALL things were created by Him, and for Him: And He is before ALL things, and by Him ALL things consist" (Col. 1:16-17).

"For <u>by</u> ('*en*', in) **Him were all things created"** – Foremost, He is the inherent Designer of all things, the Initiator, the Architect. He prepared the 'Blueprint', outlining the form, the functioning and coordination across the full realm of creation, adorning it with beauty and personalities, "in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible", spirit and material. He purposed it all as He similarly gave Moses and David, by His Spirit, the 'Blueprints' of the Tabernacle (Exod. 25:40) and the first Temple respectively (1Chron. 28:11-19).

"All things were created <u>by</u> ('*dia*', through) **Him"** – But He is also the Master Craftsman, the Artificer, through whom all things were brought into being, over a purposeful six day period respecting our physical world (Genesis 1) – "the work of Thy fingers" (Psa. 8:3) emphasising in expressive terms the skill and intricate detail involved. John enforced this truth in facing the same error as Paul: "ALL things were made by Him; and without Him was not any thing made that was made" (John 1:3). The voice of God, Elohim (Gen. 1), and of voice the LORD, Jehovah (Psa. 33:6-9), that spoke the world into being, was His Own voice within the godhead!

"And <u>for</u> Him" – He was also the Purpose, Intent and Aim of the creation, made for His satisfaction and enjoyment. Moses tells us that "on the seventh day He (God) rested, and was refreshed" (Exod. 31:17). God took pleasure and delight in all that He had accomplished; "and, behold, it was very good" (Gen. 1:31). John recorded the worship in heaven just prior to the Lamb reaching for the scroll which He was alone entitled to take, "Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for Thou hast created all things, and for Thy pleasure they are and were created" (Rev. 4:11). The apostle Paul, after comprehensively unfolding God's purpose in Romans, reaches to sublime heights, "For of Him, and through Him, and to Him, are all things: to Whom be glory for ever. Amen" (Rom. 11:36; Cp. 9:5). The Hebrew writer declares of Christ the Son, that He was designated the "heir of ALL things" (Heb. 1:2) even before the worlds (ages) were made. Hence, the Son is God!

"And He is <u>before</u> all things" – He is Antecedent to everything by His eternal existence, remaining incomprehensibly greater than any being or matter of His creation. He declared Himself as, "I AM THAT I AM", when He appeared to Moses at the inconsumable burning bush on Mount Horeb (Exod. 3) and Who declared Himself as such to haughty Jews (John 8:58). He as the infinite God, who is Spirit, is self-existing and self-sustaining; we depend on Him, for our existence.

"And <u>by</u> Him all things consist" – Hence, He is also the Sustainer of the world, its Administrator who is "upholding all things by the word of His power" (Heb. 1:3). Men, seeking to explain the behaviour of gravity, gases, light, molecules etc. by physical laws and equations, have discovered incredible consistency yet also considerable complexity within its atoms; ALL is held together by the Word of Christ and one day will be dissolved by the same Word (Heb. 12:26-29). So while this current world is becoming more disorderly and disruptive by the day, dominated by rampant sin, all is under His control; the ultimate purpose of God and His eternal counsels will be fulfilled as many other Scriptures testify to, after which this "present world" will be replaced by the "world to come".

"The FIRSTBORN from the Dead"

While "firstborn of every creature" links Christ with the physical created world, "firstborn from the dead", links Him with redemption. He entered and emerged from Mary's womb as her FIRSTBORN Son in order that He might die on the cross for sin, and rise again from the dead and become the Saviour of the world, and to establish a new order of Headship:

> "And He is the head of the body, the church: Who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in ALL things He might have the preeminence" (Col. 1:18).

His resurrection is unique for a number of reasons: (i) to fulfil Scripture and His anticipation of it, "My flesh also shall rest in hope. For Thou wilt not leave My soul in hell; neither wilt Thou suffer Thine Holy One to see corruption" (Psa. 16:9-10); (ii) His sinless character demanded it, "Whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible that He should be holden of it" (Acts 2:24); (iii) It was the vindication of Himself, His claims of deity, "Declared to be the Son of God with power … by the resurrection from the dead" (Rom. 1:4); (iv) As the basis for our acceptance with God, "Who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification" (Rom. 4:25); (v) He was the typical firstfruit sheaf, waved on the first day of a week (Lev. 23:10-14), raised from among the dead, "But every man in his order; Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's at His coming" (1Cor. 15:23); (vi) To certify that the dead will be raised and judged by Him (Acts 17:31); (vii) To bring in a new order of manhood and Headship. As the last Adam, He heads up a new race of people, those whom have been redeemed by His precious blood because of His sacrifice at Golgotha (1Cor. 15:45).

He is the "first begotten of the dead" (Rev. 1:5) is a fact and in whom all honour and dignity, as the mighty victor over the powers of hell. resides. He was dead and now is alive as was testified by many eyewitnesses (1Cor. 15:3-8). He has declared, "I am He that liveth, and was dead; and behold, I am alive for evermore. Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death" (Rev. 1:18). But being "the FIRSTBORN of the dead" involves more than this; His resurrection was the first of a kind; others raised before Him, including Lazarus who He Himself raised (John 11), all died again, waiting a future resurrection. He was the first to be raised from the dead never to die again, and all those who experience the imparting of divine life and subjects of the "first resurrection" in its different phases, have acquired their spiritual life and future hope based upon this tremendous fact. As such then He has become the Head of a new order of things, that which the first man, Adam, lost through disobedience at the beginning of time.

Today this Headship in expressed in His Church, not that He is, "The Beginning" of the church, but the One from Whom she exists, her source, from Whom the members derive their life. As the firstborn of Israel were chosen by God to hold a special position to Him (Exod. 13:12-16) albeit who were later replaced by the tribe of Levi (Num. 3:13, 45-50), so those whom comprise the "church of the firstborn" (Heb. 12:23) hold a special place to Christ as "His bride", where the distinction of Jew and Gentile no longer exists (Eph. 2:12-22). We, as members of the body under His headship should take our directions and instructions from Him (Eph. 4:15-16), even as our heads control our physical bodies. It is essential to maintain the vital lifeline and "abide in Him" (John 15:4; 1John 2:28), individually and corporately, to ensure we bear out the effective testimony that is expectant and worthy of Him in the window of opportunity that He gives us in the generation of people among whom we live (Acts 13:36).

Yet reference to His future Millennial reign through Israel is indicated in Hebrews 1:6, "When He bringeth in the first begotten into the world, He saith, And let all the angels of God Worship Him". As honour and praise and angelic pronouncement was given at His first lowly coming to earth (Luke 2:13), so at His second coming in power and glory, He will be accompanied by mighty angelic hosts (Mark 8:38; 2Thess. 1:7) which will be witnessed by the world (Rev. 1:7).

"Also I will make him My firstborn, higher than the kings of the earth" (Psa. 89:27). His Millennial reign will be established with Him sitting as King on the throne of David as promised (2Sam. 7:12-16) over a united nation, whose last king fell with the demise of the Southern Kingdom of Judah at its overthrow by the

armies of Nebuchadnezzar, which initiated the "Times of the Gentiles" (Luke 21:24). Christ, who rejected the blasphemous offer of Satan in the wilderness to have the rule over the ignoble kingdoms of men with all their boasted and transient vain glory (Matt. 4:8-10), even He will establish a rule of righteousness and fairness across the face of the earth (Isa. 11).

His kingdom will far exceed that of Solomon's in extent, duration, wisdom and glory, "For the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea" (Hab. 2:14). With this end in view the promise is made through Isaiah, "And the firstborn of the poor shall feed, and the needy shall lie down in safety" (Isa. 14:30). While seeing a partial fulfilment in the then nations current distress, it will reach its fulness when the chief of the poor will enjoy the bounty of Millennial blessings, following the oppression of antichrist on the remnant of Israel, when they had cried daily, "give us this day our daily bread" (Matt. 6:11; Rev. 12:6).

Christ will be the Head of the New Creation of God. While in measure it will be seen during His Millennial reign, it also takes us beyond this, into the 'Eternal State', as we refer to it, when sin and death will no more plague, and what Christ began as the "firstborn of all creation" will reach its fulfilment as Him being the "firstborn from the dead". As He pronounced to the church of the Laodiceans, "These things saith the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning ('beginner', 'originator') of the creation of God" (Rev. 3:14). Such a profound statement lays weight upon His essential deity, His work accomplished on earth as His first advent and faithful testimony borne to the truth even unto death, and the One to Whom all creation holds its beginnings, not only the current world, or those made new in Christ by conversion (2Cor. 5:17), but also of the "new heaven and a new earth" (Rev. 21:1) yet to come.

"That in ALL things HE might have the PREEMINANCE" (Col. 1:18) sums up the Ultimate purpose of God for His Son; With such a One who is our Head, and with all that He has and will accomplish, it surely behoves us to ensure that He takes the preeminent position in our individual, family and assembly lives as we await His coming, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). At what pace is this happening in us? Let us ensure that we never become a Diotrephes "who loveth to have the preeminence" (3John 9), even over the apostles, but who was nothing but a hindrance to the work of God!

"The FIRSTBORN Among Many Brethren"

This is a further specific way in which the status as Firstborn is also used of the Lord. When He first appeared to His devoted follower Mary Magdalene after His resurrection, He gave her a commission to "go to My brethren and say unto them, I ascend unto My Father, and your Father; and to My God, and your God" (John 20:17); however our relationship with the Father and to God remains different to His, indicated by use of "MY" and "YOUR" and not "OUR". How significant for Him to address the eleven deflated disciples as "My brethren", who had so recently forsaken Him, even denied Him, and not being related to Him in the flesh. Something much more is involved here, being an association that all those who have "received Him" and being united to Him by grace through faith, stand in the good of. "For both He that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are all of one: for which cause He is not ashamed to call them brethren, Saying, I will declare Thy name unto My brethren … And again, Behold I and the children which God hath given Me" (Heb. 2:11-13; Mark 3:35).

Paul expands on this truth in his Roman epistle as he assures the saints of their secure position in Christ, despite all that may seem to be against them: "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose. For whom He did foreknow, He also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He did predestinate, them He also called: and whom He called, them He also justified: and whom He justified, them He also glorified" (Rom. 8:28-30).

Although waiting the consummation, the glorification of the saints is as certain as if already fulfilled. God will bring all to fruition. In that day, the Lord Jesus Christ will have the place of preeminence over His

redeemed people, His brethren. They will be gathered from "every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation"; they will have been then transformed into His moral likeness as the apostle John wrote, "Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when He shall appear, we shall be like Him; for we shall see Him as He is" (1John 3:2).

Paul gives another insight into that future day: "For our conversation is in Heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto His glorious body, according to the working whereby He is able even to subdue all things unto Himself" (Phil. 3:20-21). And again as he exhorted husbands with their responsibilities and obligations to love their own wives, he wrote of the depth to which Christ went with respect to the church as His bride, He "gave Himself for it; That He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word. That He might present it to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that is should be holy and without blemish" (Eph. 5:25-28).

In closing our study of Christ as the FIRSTBORN, with such a blessed hope and prospect before us, we quote John's exhortation, "And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as He is pure "(1John 3:3).

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MEN OF GOD SERIES

(24) PAUL THE APOSTLE

"Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated unto the gospel of God … Concerning his son Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 1:1-3)

The apostle Paul differed from the other apostles who knew the Lord while He was upon earth. The first revelation to Paul was of Christ in glory. Paul wrote, "That I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being made conformable unto His death: If by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead" (Phil. 3:10-11). He wrote about the Lord Jesus as "The Head of the Body, the Church: who is the beginning, the Firstborn from (among) the dead; that in all things He might have the pre-eminence" (Col. 1:18).

THE LORD HE ACKNOWLEDGED

THE YOUTH – Raised in city life, among merchants, sailors, students, a citizen of no mean city, the Roman of Tarsus. Though a Roman, he was a Hebrew, a true Jew. His father was of status providing education for his son in Jerusalem. His parents called him Saul, meaning "prayed for". He was of the tribe of Benjamin. Jacob prophesied, "Benjamin shall ravin as a wolf" (Gen. 49:27). In early life he was exceeding mad against believers in the name of Jesus, yet tender hearted towards his fellow countrymen.

THE TRAINING – He was a child of the law, trained as a Rabbi under Gamaliel in the School of Hillel. He therefore understood the Jewish mind and was blameless in outward life. His trade as a tentmaker could be pursued anywhere providing self-maintenance in journeys often. He needed few tools, used mountain goat hair. Handling course hair resulted in rough hands.

THE PERSECUTOR – Before his conversion in Acts 9, Saul of Tarsus was a blasphemer, a persecutor and injurious, thinking "that I ought to do many things contrary to the Name of Jesus of Nazareth" (Acts 26:9). He persecuted the saints in his ignorance and unbelief to strange cities where he was later sent to preach the same Name in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Saul, at about 30 or 40 years of age, was elected to the Jewish council and made havoc of the church at Jerusalem.

THE VISION AND THE VOICE

THE LANGUAGE HE USED – "Breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord" (Acts 9:1). Breathing in, inhaling an atmosphere of rage like an excited wild animal, a wolf with passion to stone, whip, imprison, even putting women in chains.

THE LETTERS HE BROUGHT – He, "went unto the high priest, And desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem" (Acts 9:1-2). "This way" referred to eight times in Acts, is the way of salvation and liberty through Jesus Christ, Saul of Tarsus sought to bring those in the freedom of forgiveness through Grace alone back into the bondage of Judaism. Religious men today, still attack those who having received the Word of God, preach repentance and faith in Christ for eternal life.

THE LIGHT HE SAW – "As he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven: And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, 'Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou Me'?" (Acts 9:3-4). This sudden sovereign revelation brought him out into the light and the conviction of his sin. How we treat the members of the Body of Christ is felt by the Head of the Body, His Church. "I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks" (Acts 9:5). Saul of Tarsus was already familiar with Old Testament glory. The truth was probably already dawning upon him. At the martyrdom of Stephen in Acts chapters 6 and 7, the young man Saul, saw something he never got over. "All that sat in the council, looking steadfastly on him (Stephen), saw his face as it had been the face of an angel" (Acts 6:15). Stephen began his address by stating, "The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham" (Acts 7:2). Stephen, "looked up steadfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God, And said, 'Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man, standing on the right hand of God'". As they stoned Stephen "the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul" (Acts 7:55-58). Saul saw the green turf of earth stained with the martyr's blood. The memories of that crushed body were "pricks" to his conscience, like ox goads, painful spurs penetrating the hide of the rebellious ox. Saul learned about the pernicious delusion of a religious bigot as a stubborn animal pained by goads.

THE LORD HE CONFESSED – "Who art Thou, Lord" (Acts 9:5). "Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?" (Acts 9:6). The glory of the Lord enabled Abraham to live, Stephen to die and caused Saul to repent. "I am Jesus", hated, despised of Nazareth who was mocked, crucified, died, buried, was risen from the dead, ascended and glorified in "heaven". Saul, trembling, astonished, fell to the earth in repentance, submission, faith and obedience. He was three days without sight. He had denied the work of Christ in death, burial and resurrection. He now by faith, entered into the meaning of that suffering, resurrection and glory. "And Saul arose" and was led by the hand and brought to Damascus. The roaring lion was led as a lamb. The light that revealed Christ blinded Saul to earthly things. The chief opponent Saul, was now to take up the mantle of the faithful martyr Stephen. Saul saw the vision, he heard the voice, he became the chosen vessel and now, his vocation was henceforth to "preach Christ among the heathen" (Gal. 1:16).

THE LIFE HE LIVED

THE ABANDONMENT TO HIS CLAIMS – "For to me to live (is) Christ, and to die (is) gain" (Phil. 1:21). Paul after his conversion, was a complete reversal, a contradiction to his former life, he committed to a Christ centred life. "For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead: And that He died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto Him which died for them, and rose again" (2Cor. 5:14-15).

The Position Paul gained though Grace was to be "in Christ".

The Purpose that Governed his life was to "live Christ".

The Preaching that Gave him joy was to "preach Christ".

The Prize he Grasped after was to "win Christ".

The Prospect Growing more special was to “be with Christ”.

THE ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF HIS CONTROL – “Christ Jesus” is a Pauline expression. His commitment was to share in the fellowship of His sufferings. His desire was to be made conformable unto His death. This meant suffering and death to any selfish self interest. The secret to this choice and commitment is the purpose and priority of giving up and sacrificing all for Christ. We must be conscious of the Divine Call, a life of conviction not convenience. Too often believers settle into an aimless jumble of a selfish, carnal, cheap, self-centred life.

THE APPREHENSION OF HIS CHOICE – “He is a chosen vessel unto Me, to bear My Name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel: For I will shew him how great things he must suffer for My names sake” (Acts 9:15-16). He was hated by the Jews, he endured hailstorms of stones, he was beaten as to death, he endured storms at sea, he was abused in the amphitheatre of raging fanatics at Damascus, Jerusalem, Antioch on to Athens, Corinth and Rome to show boldness before Cæsar. He counted all things as loss that he might win Christ.

THE ASSOCIATION WITH HIS CROSS – “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me” (Gal. 2:20). Paul’s focus was Christ, the One who took His cross upon His furrowed back and went outside the camp never to come back again. “God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world” (Gal. 6:14). To Paul, the world was a dead thing, it was crucified to Paul and Paul was crucified to it. He had suffered a violent death to worldliness. Today, as born again believers in our Lord Jesus Christ, are we prepared to bear the cost of being crucified with Christ? Have we got our convictions at the cross or do we lack this conviction. Older believers had to bear the cost of reproach. Passing generations are losing commitment. We attend meetings on the Lord’s Day. We support the Gospel with less zeal. We listen to the ministry of God’s Word with little heart. We read the Bible with no diligence. What is wrong with us? We say, have I to give up my “me time”, my social time, my holidays, my money, my luxuries? The answer is, “He gave Himself for me”.

<u>THE LABOURS HE ACCOMPLISHED</u>

Saul of Tarsus before his salvation, was the devout Jew, the fiery zealot, the bigoted Pharisee, raging like the devil he served, yet he was the vessel chosen by God in Divine Sovereignty to be the Apostle to the Gentiles. “The Lord said unto him” (Ananias) “he is a chosen vessel unto Me, to bear My Name before the Gentiles” (Acts 9:15). Paul had a burden for his own people. “My heart’s desire, and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved” (Rom. 10:1). He faced closed doors. In the temple at Jerusalem, the Lord said unto him, “Make haste, and get thee quickly out of Jerusalem: for they will not receive thy testimony concerning Me” (Acts 22:18). The Lord opened doors. “Depart: for I will send thee far hence unto the Gentiles” (Acts 22:21). He had no programme; he was slow to discuss forward plans, but his exercise and burden guided by the Spirit of God, was to discover the track of the Lord’s will which was unto God a sweet fragrance of Christ. He had character, energy, leadership, thought, learning and languages but he never displayed self-confidence or used natural ability. The Corinthians said that his bodily presence was weak and his speech contemptible. You would not leave Paul’s meetings saying, what a great preacher. You would say what a Great Saviour, Christ crucified, “God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world” (Gal. 6:14).

Before salvation, Saul found it hard to kick against the “pricks”, like goads in the side of a stubborn heifer troubling his conscience. After salvation he said; “Lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure” (2Cor. 12:7). This permanent, painful ailment was allowed by God, but Satan was the agent so willing to bring it. This irritating bodily affliction is not specified that the balm of comfort may be applied to all who have differing afflictions. Like the touching of the hollow of Jacob’s thigh in the sinew that shrank (Gen. 32:32), this embarrassing affliction was to prevent pride and to preserve humility, “for this thing I besought the Lord thrice” (2Cor. 12:8).

This was not a plea but a specific desire. He expressed this request directly to the Lord Jesus, who Himself, in the Garden of Gethsemane, spoke the same words three times, as He anticipated the cup of fearful suffering. Paul got a direct answer; "And He said unto me, 'My grace is sufficient for thee: for My strength is made perfect in weakness'". Paul henceforth took "pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong" (2Cor. 12:8-10). His labours involved a great fight of affliction and a howling mob at Jerusalem, beasts at Ephesus, barbarous brutality at Philippi and multiplied sorrows, anguish and tears over the assemblies. "By the grace of God I am what I am: and His grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but I laboured more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me" (1Cor. 15:9-10).

THE LETTERS HE WROTE

Paul's care of all the churches developed in his journeys and ever expanding sphere of labour. His epistles were not abstract studies in theology from the pen of a cloistered scholar. They arose from real life situations providing answers to vital questions and pastoral care to feed and protect the flock from coming dangers. The sequence of writing indicates the development of increased persecution and false teaching which threatened the spiritual wellbeing of the assemblies. The attacks upon each of the seven churches to which Paul wrote were attacks upon the Person and Work of Christ: Romans by religious partiality (Rom. 3:9); Corinthian's by assembly carnality (1Cor. 3:1-4); Galatians by Judaistic legality (Gal. 2:21); Ephesians by coming disloyalty (Eph. 6:13-17); Philippians by Christian disunity (Phil. 2:1-3); Colossians by Gnostic philosophy (Col. 2:8); Thessalonians by believers perplexity about coming events (1Thess. 4:13).

As in all the Scriptures, Christ is presented by Paul as the key to answer these issues: In Romans, Christ is presented as our Righteousness (3:22); in 1Corinthians he preaches Christ crucified (1:23); in 2Corinthians, Christ glorified (1:19-20). The answer to Galatians legality is Christ our liberty (5:1). In Ephesians we are to focus upon Christ in the Heavenlies (1:3). Christ is our Calling in Philippians (3:14); our Hope in Colossians (1:27); in Thessalonians, Christ is presented at His Coming (1Thess. 2:19) and His Revelation (2Thess. 1:7).

Paul wrote four personal epistles from prison to encourage his fellow labourers. The two letters to Timothy and one to Titus, contain important teaching with assembly background. The short little personal letter to Philemon, written within prison walls by a manacled hand is a masterpiece of Christian grace, wisdom, refinement, delicate style and irresistible courtesy. Even as Christ was the Mediator for us, so Paul's intervention in love on behalf of the unprofitable offender, Onesimus for the love and forgiveness of the offended, Philemon is a vital lesson in the development of the love of Christ for one another. Apart from David, the sweet Psalmist, there is no other inspired writer in Scripture, who reveals his inward burdens, feelings and spiritual motives like Paul the apostle of Jesus Christ. Paul's letters teach us how to treat one another in the Lord, show the practical works of salvation, receive others in love and grace, sacrifice and serve with joy, in fact manifest Christ in our mortal bodies. If we include Hebrews, the great theme of the epistle is Christ Supreme.

THE LEGACY HE LEFT

Paul was a **BUILDER.** He spent much of his life in the great cities of his day, Jerusalem, Athens, Thessalonica and Philippi, eventually Rome. He observed great temples and houses built by the Greeks and Romans. He thought of materials, stones, foundations and structures. In Ephesus there was the Great Temple of Diana with 128 pillars. He wrote to Timothy at Ephesus about a far greater building: "The House of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth" (1Tim. 3:15). As a little tentmaker, one of his greatest works being in Corinth, he said to the assembly, "Ye are God's Building" (1Cor. 3:9). He spoke about the foundation, "Jesus Christ", the Master builder (architect), the materials, the construction, the building up and sadly the possibility of destruction (1Cor. 3:10-17).

Paul was a **SOLDIER**. He witnessed the imperial might of the Roman Empire, the conquering legions of the invaders, imprisoned at Rome he was guarded and perhaps chained to a member of the elite Prætorian Guard. Paul himself was engaged in active warfare, he was in the thick of the battle against principalities

and powers. Again, to Timothy he wrote; “Endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No man that warreth entangleth himself with the affairs of this life; that he may please Him who hath chosen him to be a soldier” (2Tim. 2:3-4). This to Paul was a conflict of life and death, the enemy takes no prisoners, without were fightings, within were fears. He had to live on war time rations, not “entangled” or hampered with materialism or luxuries. Paul could say at the end of life, “I have fought a good fight” (2Tim. 4:7).

Paul was an **ATHLETE**. All the great population centres of Paul’s day, at Athens, Ephesus or Rome had huge amphitheatres or arenas, some of the historical ruins still remain. The Greek Games have become the modern Olympics. The Isthmian Games were held biannually at Corinth. Paul used the figures of the race, the runner, the rules and the rewards. His metaphor was the long marathon race, not a brief sprint. This involved discipline, diet and running the course according to the rules. “We are made a spectacle (theatre, arena) unto the world, and (both) to angels, and to men” (1Cor. 4:9). He was a wrestler, “not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places” (Eph. 6:12). Some of the Corinthians believers were like spectators, they sat as kings in the balcony watching others like Paul contending earnestly to exhaustion in the arena.

There are still two classes of believers in the assemblies, those who do the work and those who let them. Paul wrote, “I keep under my body”, training and self denial (1Cor. 9:27). “I press toward the mark for (unto) the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:14). This was not a competition but he always ran as a prize winner runs towards the finishing line. We must “strive lawfully” (2Tim. 2:5), essentially following the guidebook, the course laid out by the Word of God. The preacher must be guided in his movements in the doctrine of the Gospel, the shepherd teaching the truth of Scripture, the sister not taking a path for which she has no authority. “Ye did run well; who did hinder you that ye should not obey the truth” (Gal. 5:7).

Paul was a **HUSBANDMAN**. Paul left an abiding legacy where ever he served; a legacy of love and labours, of teaching and example. He left lessons from architecture, the army, athletics and agriculture. He made long journeys on foot sometimes alone through the countryside. He observed labours in agriculture – ploughing, sowing, reaping, harvesting and fruit gathering. “The husbandman that laboureth must be first partaker of the fruits” (2Tim. 2:6). To the assembly at Corinth, Paul entered the field “in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling” (1Cor. 2:3). He said, “We are labourers together with God; ye are God’s husbandry” (1Cor. 3:9). “I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase” (1Cor. 3:6). For this great work, he followed the chief example of the Lord Himself. “The Kingdom of Heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field” (Matt. 13:24).

The apostle Paul desired to “live Christ” and to leave a legacy to His glory when the building would be complete, the race would be won, the victory would be achieved and the great harvest would be gathered in. Paul’s last recorded words anticipate the verdict of the Righteous Judge. “I am now ready to be offered” (already poured out); the FRAGRANCE, “and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight”; the FIGHT, all opponents vanquished, conquest over; “I have finished my course”; the FINISH, the allotted course; “I have kept the faith”; the FAITH, the body of truth, the deposit of doctrine entrusted to him and defended against all attack (2Tim. 4:6-7).

Paul began his life of service, with that early question, “Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?” (Acts 9:6). Paul looked forward to the day of assessment by the Lord. “Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, that righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love His appearing” (2Tim. 4:8).

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"Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation"
(2Corinthians 6:2)

There is a phrase, **"It's Now or Never"** that is sometimes used to convey a sense of urgency respecting an opportunity that may never come again. It is also used to force people into making rash decisions, often with disastrous outcomes.

No choices we make in life have such momentous consequences as those affecting our eternal welfare. Are you acquainted with the truths of the glorious Gospel of Christ, even able to explain clearly the meaning of words associated with its message, yet remain in a state of unbelief and rebellion against God? You would not be alone! Many, brought up in favourable circumstances, hearing the Gospel from childhood, remain negligent, indifferent or are now outright opposed. There are many others who are, ***"Ever learning, and never able to come to a knowledge of the truth"***[1], because they refuse to bow to the singular authority of God's Word.

Throughout the Bible, God warns against all such attitudes, clearly instructing us that He, as our Maker and the sustainer of life, is ***"longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance."***[2] There are many reasons why eternal salvation should be of the utmost concern to us:

Because of the Great Cost for God to PROVIDE it

God spoke this incredible world into existence through the power of His spoken word, ***"And God said, Let there be … Let there be … Let there be … And it was so"***[3], with an earth perfectly suited for mankind's habitation allowing communion with Him without mediation or inhibition, until man rebelled, sinned and fell.

But God in great mercy and grace has now provided the basis for reconciling a sinful and rebellious world back to Himself: He ***"spared not His own Son"***[4], making ***"His soul on offering for sin"***[5]. He could show no greater expression of His love, give no greater gift than His well beloved Son, to meet mankind's greatest need.

Because PEACE with God is only POSSIBLE by it

By no law code could we merit it; no animal sacrifice could provide it! The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ has finally satisfied the righteous demands of God: ***"Having made peace through the blood of His cross."***[6] But we need to confess and repent of our sins, our unbelief, and rest by faith in Christ alone to prevent God's judgement falling upon us. ***"Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."***[7] Then we shall know God's peace: ***"Grace be to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord Jesus Christ."***[8]

Because Life only has an Objective PURPOSE with it

People seek meaning to life through many outlets, religion being one. Those who disbelief in God have no answers as to why the universe and life should exist, except by random chance! Yet, even acknowledging the One True God as Creator gives us NO hope unless we have been reconciled to Him through His Son. Then everything changes! Eternal life begins at conversion to Christ and while we will not enter into the fullness of the blessings on earth, we no longer live that aimless life that so many pursue but can live in the light of eternal realities and serve the Lord and Saviour of mankind with the days left to us. He said of His sheep, ***"I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly."***[9] To many it has meant trials and afflictions, but they have ***"endured as seeing Him who is invisible"***[10], resting on His precious promises to bring them through to glory.

Because We will PERISH “in our Sins” without it

In contrast, to die without God’s great salvation graciously offered in Christ His Son, demands that we will perish and suffer for ever in Hell. We live in a very privileged age. Before Christ came, the living God, ***“In times past suffered all nations to walk in their own ways”***[11], when ***“the times of this ignorance God winked at…”***, that is He endured with, creations witness being a testimony to these people of His existence. But that has changed: ***“…But NOW*** *(God)* ***commandeth all men every where to repent: Because He has appointed a day, in the which He will judge the world in righteousness by that Man whom He hath ordained…”***[12] Because of Christ, God in great mercy and concern for your soul commands your repentance.

Because Opportunity may PASS us by if we Ignore it

It is emphasised again; nothing is more important in life than to be reconciled to the true and living God before we die, that is, to receive His salvation in Christ. It is like no other transaction that can take place on earth: it will change our standing with God, our destiny, our life and aims. Luke in his Gospel account records three individuals who grasped the opportunity given them. The crowd tried to silence blind Bartimæus but he continued crying out for mercy and received his sight. Short Zacchæus, not deterred by the size of the crowd, climbed a tree to see who Jesus was, and received salvation. One of the crucified thieves with almost his last breath, used it by crying to the Lord to secure his soul, before passing into eternity.

We should not defer in settling our standing with God any longer for, ***“Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of Salvation.”*** Is it an, **“It’s Now or Never”** time for you? But be careful! Too many make a rash “decision”, often pressurised from so called ‘evangelists’ with alternative motives, which proves in time to be a false profession, as seed falling on hard ground having no root or choked by the cares of life. Weigh it up; let God’s Holy Spirit convince you of your sin and with purpose of heart, by faith, receive Christ as your Saviour and Lord.

Bible Ref’s: [1]2Timothy 3:7; [2]2Peter 3:9; [3]Genesis 1; [4]Romans 8:32; [5]Isaiah 53:10; [6]Colossians 1:20; [7]Romans 5:1; [8]Galatians 1:3; [9]John 10:10; [10]Hebrews 11:27; [11]Acts 14:16; [12]Acts 17:30-31.

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