

Scripture Truth



Inside:

Psalms 22
Jacob & Sons
The seven churches

Paul's neglected letter
Lessons from the pandemic
"A kingdom that cannot be moved"

Volume 61 No.2

April – June 2022

SCRIPTURE TRUTH

Editor: Theo Balderston

Editor's e-mail: editor@scripturetruth.org.uk

SCRIPTURE TRUTH is published every three months to expound the teaching of the Scriptures so that we “may be thoroughly equipped for every good work”.

Annual Subscription 2022

£13.35 Post Free UK – £18.00 Post Free Overseas

Contents

Lessons from the pandemic	T. Balderston	29
Psalm 22.....	Brian Donaldson	30
“A kingdom that cannot be moved”	John Wilson Smith	36
Jacob & Sons.....	Genesis 32 – 35	F. B. Hole.....39
The seven churches	Revelation 1:20 – 3:22	Theo Balderston..... 45
Paul's neglected letter	Theo Balderston.....	51
The contrast (poem)	Edward L. Bevir	Back cover

Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from The Authorized (King James) Version (KJV). Rights in the Authorized Version are vested in the Crown. Reproduced by permission of the Crown's patentee, Cambridge University Press.

Scripture quotations marked (Darby Tr.) are taken from “The Holy Scriptures, a New Translation from the Original Languages” by J. N. Darby (G Morrish, 1890).

Scripture quotations marked (ESV) are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.
Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked (NKJV) are taken from the New King James Version®.
Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from
The Holy Bible, New International Version (Anglicised edition)
Copyright © 1979, 1984, 2011 by Biblica (formerly International Bible Society).
Used by permission of Hodder & Stoughton Publishers, an Hachette uk company. All rights reserved.
‘NIV’ is a registered trademark of Biblica (formerly International Bible Society).
uk trademark number 1448790.

Front cover: After a thunderstorm, Dead Sea, Israel©iStock.com/kavram

SCRIPTURE TRUTH is the imprint of the Central Bible Hammond Trust
Registered Charity No. 223327

All business correspondence and orders should be addressed to:

SCRIPTURE TRUTH Publications

31-33 Glover Street, CREWE, Cheshire CW1 3LD

Tel: 01270 252274

Lessons from the pandemic

Has the pandemic been a judgment from God? Certainly, the Lord Jesus said that the judgment of this world was now fixed. But He also said that it was not to be immediate, not, in fact, till “the last day” (John 12:31, 46-48, NKJV), and here “the last day” means the resurrection day (6:39; 11:24). The time in between is “the acceptable year of the Lord” (Isaiah 61:2; Luke 4:19). On the occasion that our Lord read these words from Isaiah in Nazareth, He thereupon closed the scroll, and left unread the words that followed, “... and the day of judgment of our God.” Likewise Paul wrote, apropos Isaiah 49:8, that, “Now is the accepted time; now is the day of salvation” (2 Corinthians 6:2).

Certainly reprobate individuals – Ananias and Sapphira, Herod Agrippa I – were summarily struck down; and there is also Elymas (Acts 5:1-11; 12:21ff; 13:11). There are tales of similar occurrences in more recent history. But when Agabus prophesied a universal famine, he did not call it a judgment. Rather, his prophecy prompted the saints in Antioch to arrange timely help for their fellow-believers in Jerusalem (Acts 11:28-30).

On the basis of all these Scriptures this writer holds that the present is the day of God’s grace towards the nations, not one when He is visiting judgment on nations. If, indeed, Revelation chapters 6 - 18 were to be understood as referring to the present, then one would have to conclude the opposite. But I think that Revelation chapter 4 rules out this interpretation, and demands the “futurist” interpretation, as will be argued, God willing, in a forthcoming article in this magazine.

But nor is the pandemic “just one of these things.” Such epidemics are surely God’s *warning* to the nations. The Lord said, “Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered such things? I tell you, no, but unless you repent you will all likewise perish” (Luke 13:2,3).

T. BALDERSTON

Psalm 22

Brian Donaldson

This heart-warming article originated as a broadcast on the Truthfortoday.org.uk radio programme last December.

The Book of Psalms was the hymn book of the children of Israel. Like all hymns, its psalms cover all aspects of our lives' experiences. Some cheer us when sad, some encourage us in difficulties, and some rejoice with us. Many give expression to our worship and praise of God in a way our own words cannot. However, unlike all other hymns, they are the inspired Word of God. And, as well as reflecting the human experiences of their authors (which we can no doubt learn from and be encouraged by), the psalms also (like all other Scripture) have the person of Christ running through them, the Thread that indeed brings together the whole of the Bible.

Psalm 22 is an especial example of this last point. It is a "messianic" psalm, one of the select group of psalms which directly refer to Christ as the expected Deliverer and King of His ancient people, Israel. While to some extent we can see Christ in all the psalms (as we can in all Scripture), Messianic psalms speak of no other person than Christ, the coming Messiah.

And, among such psalms, Psalm 22 says more about the cross than any other, and foretells the horrors of crucifixion long before crucifixion was used as a punishment. It also contains some of the actual sayings of Christ on the cross. So this wonderful psalm should both bow our hearts in sorrow as we think again about the cost of our redemption, and lift them in worship as we think of the wonderful triumph that Christ has wrought – for us now, but also for all of God's people, both in the millennial day to come and for all eternity.

We should not skip the heading of this (or any other) psalm. Our Lord regarded such headings as part of the inspired Word (see Matthew 22:43), and so should we. They can give important clues to the meanings of the psalms. The heading for Psalm 22 includes the words, "Aijeleth Shahar" (see KJV), which the NKJV gives as "the deer of the dawn." Perhaps we can visualise the

*Psalm 22 says more about the cross
than any other psalm*

deer being startled by a huntsman at dawn, and hunted relentlessly. Our Lord was hunted by Herod during His very earliest days (Matthew 2:7ff), and then by the religious and secular powers all His public life until their “hunting” culminated in His death on the cross.

We can say that, more than all other psalms, Psalm 22 is the “Psalm of the Cross.” We are immediately confronted by this in the powerful words of verse 1, “My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me? Why are You so far from helping Me, and from the words of My groaning?” (NKJV) These are the words the Lord quoted from the cross near the end of the three hours of darkness (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34). A few years ago, while on holiday, I met some young Jewish men who understood Hebrew. I told them that I was a Christian, and quoted this verse to them. They were unaware of the verse, but after some discussion among themselves, they were able to give the meaning of “*lama sabachthani*” as “being completely abandoned in the wilderness”.

I felt at the time a real sense of the power in this. As the Lord felt the full weight of being the Sin-bearer He called out twice to God; but, in order that His atoning work be accomplished, His cries were not acted upon. We see a little picture of this in Leviticus 16:21,22, when, on the Day of Atonement, the scapegoat had the sins of the people confessed upon it, and then was taken to an utterly uninhabited place to be let go, and abandoned. Leviticus 16:21 also tells us that it was “by the hand of a suitable man” that the “scapegoat” was to be taken into the wilderness. Similarly, in order to deal with sin in all its vileness to a holy and righteous God, the only “Suitable Man” who ever lived was made sin and utterly abandoned in the wilderness.

Verse 1 of Psalm 22 is the only full Scripture verse quoted by the Lord in His seven sayings from the cross. But His final “saying” – “It is finished!” (John 19:30) – surely points our hearts to the final words of this psalm – “that He has done this!” Some commentators even wonder whether the Lord actually quoted the whole of this psalm as He hung there on that great and awful day. From king David’s own point of view as he composed these words, they were a prayer that had lifted him from the worst experience of his life into the glory of relationship with God. But, considered as prophecy concerning Christ, there is far more to them than this.

The first and longer part of the psalm (vv.1-21) concerns the Lord’s sufferings on the cross. As we read this section, we cannot but recognise the great horror of these sufferings. The eternal Son of God, who was always the delight of God the Father, had stepped into time to become the Son of man, in order to go

*The eternal Son of God stepped into time
to go to the cross*

to the cross where sin would be judged in Him. He had placed Himself in the position where His cries of verses 1 and 2 were not heard. However, at the end of verse 21 we encounter a marked change of tone – in the words, “You have answered Me.” From that point the subject of the psalm changes from “the sufferings” to “the glories that will follow” (cp. 1 Peter 1:11). These later verses of the psalm are prophetic of what will happen in a day still to come as a result of Calvary’s work being completed. In them we see praise and thanksgiving; how different the tone of them from the laments and the sufferings described in the first twenty-one verses!

And now to look at the verses more closely. Verses 4 and 5 draw a comparison between the Sufferer and “the fathers” who had trusted in God when persecuted: *they* were delivered. Though many of them were shamefully treated, abused, and even killed, yet God did not abandon them. All through history many believers have been persecuted by their fellow men. Psalm 22:1-21 is very different. Only Christ as the Sin-bearer could say these things.

Verse 3 is also worth consideration for its clear and simple statement of God’s holiness. This means that we can never question the ways of God, but, rather, can rest on His unfailing holiness. The serpent in the garden tried to cast doubt on what God had really said, but someone holding on to the unchanging holiness of God could never do this. Then in verse 6 we find the astonishing, self-deprecating, description of the Speaker in this psalm as “a worm, and no man”. How could this ever be said of the Son of God? Yet in Matthew 26:67 we read how members of the Sanhedrin spat in His face, and beat it.

In Philippians 2:8, the apostle Paul teaches us that Christ, *having become man*, humbled Himself yet further. He submitted to all the above abuse, and then became obedient even to the point of death – adding, as if to underline the horror of it, “even the death of a cross”.

The seventh and eighth verses further emphasise the degradation of the cross. There is no form of death sentence so utterly contemptuous of the condemned as crucifixion. The people who walked past the cross felt at liberty to shake their heads, and ridicule what they thought of as being weakness and failure.

There is no form of death sentence so contemptuous of the condemned as crucifixion.

“Save Yourself and come down from the cross”, they jeered (Mark 15:30).

And how many people today will still mock the cross of Calvary? If anyone reading this is just casually “passing by”, in the sense of being unmoved by it, then please read the psalm itself: its fulfilment could not have been arranged unless God were in it. No-one could have “arranged” the accurate foretelling of crucifixion, a *Roman* death penalty, so long before. And no ordinary Judean could have arranged for the stubborn Pilate to be persuaded to pronounce it! It was the most pivotal moment in the whole of history

Verses 9, 10 and 11 are reminiscent of David’s own relationship with Jehovah. Remember the faith in which as a young man he ran to face Goliath, when all the mighty men of Israel quaked at the sight of the giant. But they are also true in a far deeper way of the Lord Jesus: see Mark 1:35; Luke 2:49; John 1:14.

Verses 12 to 18 describe graphically both the violence of crucifixion and the depth of feeling that the Lord passed through during the three hours of darkness (Matthew 27:45, etc.). This was not just like a darkness of night; it was a supernatural darkness that could not be penetrated. We read of the strong bulls of Bashan (v.12): Bashan was a fertile place of good pasture, and its bulls would be well-fed and strong. Think of a naked and seemingly helpless, weak, and beaten Man circled by men acting like beasts! Think of the Lion of the tribe of Judah (Revelation 5:5) being helpless before “a raging and roaring lion” (Psalm 22:13) on account of your sin, and mine!

In verse 16 we get the picture of dogs surrounding Him, closing in on every side. Ancient dogs were vicious, and not “lap dogs”. Perhaps we see here the thought of the psalm’s heading again – of the deer being chased by the hunter and closed in upon as the hunt comes to its conclusion. The Gospels record that the notice above Jesus’ cross was in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, signifying not only that the whole world was without excuse as to Who was hanging there, but also that all the enemies of God had closed in upon Him.

Verse 16 also tells us that His hands and feet were pierced – the hands that had touched the leper, picked up the children, and healed the eyes of the blind man, the feet that had taken Him so many miles in the service of His Father

*In life, our Lord was not heard,
but once He had died He was heard.*

and to the blessing of man – yet here pierced through and nailed to a cross as if He were a common criminal. All His bones were out of joint: He could feel and count each one. If you have ever had even one joint dislocated you will agree how painful this is, but *all* His bones were out of joint after being stretched on that cross! As already noted, the excruciating pain of crucifixion was unknown at the time of writing the psalm.

In verse 18 we are given the details of His ultimate humiliation: His clothing was stripped from Him and divided among the Roman soldiers. Then His tunic, that was woven without a seam, was gambled for. The soldiers recognised the value of a piece of clothing but gave no value to the Lord of creation! All four Gospel-writers mention this incident; and in fact both Matthew (27:35) and John (19:24) specially quote this very verse in this context. How amazing to think of David writing these things, as directed by the Holy Spirit, when he had no real understanding of them; and of the Holy Spirit moving the Gospel writers centuries later to verify the prophecies!

Luke records, immediately before recording the dividing of the garments, that the Lord said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do” (23:34). So, even in such painful and humiliating circumstances, the Lord’s heart was moved by grace to forgive.

Psalm 22 changes abruptly at the end of verse 21, with the words, “You have answered me.” At this point we have gone from seeing an abandoned, helpless, and so badly abused Saviour to seeing One no longer deserted. We may find the background to this in the end of Hebrews 5:7, “... to Him who was able to save Him out of death, and was heard...” Most translations give “from death”, but the original reads “out of death” (see Darby Tr.). In life, our Lord was not heard, but once He had died and His body placed in the tomb, He was heard. There He was delivered from the sword, the power of the dog, the lion’s mouth and the horns of wild oxen (vv.20,21), all speaking of the devil and his domain – death and the grave. At the point when the world was cloaked in darkness, the Saviour of the world went into death and broke its power, so that He could rise victoriously on the third day. Death and the grave were defeated, and God

*Psalm 22:27 speaks of a time when the
whole world will bow the knee*

the Father was glorified. So the work was finished. And then the Lord could say, “You have answered me”.

From verse 22 to the end of the psalm, we are introduced to “the glories that would follow” (1 Peter 1:11). Praise and worship should follow such a glorious victory. Not even king David himself, who had enjoyed many triumphs, could have imagined, as he wrote these words, the full impact of what this victory will engender for all eternity.

Verse 22 starts with the clause, “I will declare Your name to My brethren.” And the Lord would say to Mary, “Go to my brethren, and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, and to my God and Your God’” (John 20:17). Those disciples, with all their faults and shortcomings, were now through Christ’s finished work brought into the category of those who know God the Father! The Lord has, indeed, become the Leader of their – and our – praises to His Father (Psalm 22:22; Hebrews 2:12).

Much of this part of Psalm 22 is primarily referring to the future earthly blessings for restored Israel in the age to come. So we read firstly of blessings for the Jewish remnant and indeed all Israel (vv.23, 25, 26), then for the entire world (vv.27-29), and finally for all further generations (v.30). Psalm 22:27 speaks of a time when the whole world will bow the knee and acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:10).

So, as we see in this psalm the wonderful work of Christ on the cross, let us appreciate, more and more each day, what that work means for every believer, and for the glory of God the Father – and be increasingly thankful for it!. Psalm 22 finishes with words that will ring out for all eternity: so it is only fitting that we finish with them too: “That He has done this!”

“He has done this!”

“A kingdom that cannot be moved”

John Wilson Smith

This short piece was written at the start of 1916 when the brutality of the campaigns of 1915 had shocked the public mind. Now that (as of January, 2022) tremors are again disturbing the European peace of the last seventy-five years, JWS's remarks are again relevant – even if the current Ukraine crisis passes.

Where can such a kingdom as “cannot be moved” (Hebrews 12:28) be found? We witness to-day the instability of thrones and kingdoms on all hands, and are aware of a condition of insecurity in things below, as perhaps never before. Just as civilization was reaching her climax, peace tribunals promising arbitration, and the brotherhood of man appearing (in theory at least) to guarantee concord everywhere, there fell, like a bolt, on the most advanced of the nations, a convulsion which has shaken their very foundations. What does this mean? If such a break-up of the bonds of international society has happened in this, the year of our Lord 1916, when not only civilization but the peace-giving truths of Christianity have spread far and wide, what security have we for the future? Even supposing that other forms of government, and a still more effective kind of education are called into existence, is it likely that these things will be more able to prevent another shake of the nations?¹

Far from it! The fact is, that in their very nature such kingdoms are “shakeable”, transitory, and dissoluble. Where are Babylon, Medo-Persia and Greece today? (See Daniel 2:31-45). They had their day and have been shaken; and what has happened to them will also happen to the kingdoms of the present. They are all to become like the chaff of the threshing-floor, and to crumble into dust (cp. Daniel 2:35).

A stone, cut out without hands, is to fall on the entire image, and to destroy it utterly (2:45). This, we learn, is the divinely appointed end of every species of human government, whether monarchical or democratic. The whole thing must give way to a kingdom of divine order, constructed

¹ Prescient remarks, given the failure of the League of Nations, formed in 1919, to prevent World War II!

“without hands” (2:34) and in which no element of human imperfection may have a place. This kingdom will “stand for ever.” It will be actual; its King an absolute monarch; its rule righteous, its subjects secure while dwelling happily under their vines and fig trees (cp. Micah 4:4); there shall be no evil occurring, and no adversary. Satan shall be bound; and obedience, real or feigned, rendered to its laws (Revelation 20:2ff; Deuteronomy 33:29, margin). The costly and most unprofitable science of war shall be learned no more; ploughshares and pruning-hooks shall do their own work, and peace shall reign to the ends of the earth (Psalm 72:8).

All this will be lovely, but is this the *unshakeable* kingdom of which the writer to the Hebrews speaks (12:28), and which we, Christians, believers saved during this day of grace, receive? No, when the earthly, millennial kingdom described in the last paragraph begins to run its course we shall already be beyond all earthly rule; we shall be with the Lord in the Father’s House, and in the place which His entrance on high has secured for us (John 14:3; Revelation 3:10). The call of the church is heavenly (Hebrews 3:1), and our kingdom is spiritual. Hence the apostle Paul could write that the Lord should preserve him unto His *heavenly* kingdom (see 2 Timothy 4:18).

These two kingdoms must therefore be clearly distinguished, and the unique calling of the church – that is, of all the saints of the present period – intelligently maintained. This is the kingdom which we receive (along with all else that we shall receive!) and which, thank God, cannot be moved (Hebrews 12:28). It may not at this present time be observable, and it may still exist in “mystery” (for the King is hidden in the heavens, and is refused by men here below), but, even if not visible or tangible, it is exceedingly real, and cannot be moved. Tides may ebb and flow; empires may rise and fall; calms and convulsions may succeed one another; summer yield to autumn and winter; and memory may sink into oblivion; but whatever else may be shakeable and shaken, this, the kingdom which we receive, “cannot be moved”.

We have, thank God, an anchorage in the storms which no power of evil can touch; a foundation on a rock which no flood can undermine, and a security which is inviolable amid the convulsions of time! We, ourselves:

*We have, thank God, an anchorage in the storms
which no power of evil can touch*

how weak! how fearful! how easily shaken! Acknowledging what we are in ourselves should make us value all the more, as honoured subjects of it, a kingdom which cannot be moved, and recognise our need for the “grace to serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear” (Hebrews 12:28). This is our one business to-day when things around are tottering, and when men’s hearts fail them for fear. For, says the Scripture under consideration, “our God is a consuming fire” (Hebrews 12:28, 29).

Godly fear is what is appropriate to the servants and worshippers of such a God as ours. He is spoken of in the succeeding chapter of our epistle as “the God of peace, who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ” (13:20); but, though the God of peace, He is, nonetheless, “a consuming fire” (12:29). “God is love,” but “God is light” as well (1 John 1:5; 4:16). What reverence, what awe, should mark those who serve Him! What essential holiness must characterize His kingdom! Hence its stability. The inherent corruption of all human kingdoms brings about, eventually, their downfall. Self-interest lies, necessarily, at the bottom of each and all; but not so in the kingdom which cannot be moved. Love to others – a holy and blessed love – is one of its leading features; and hence we are charged, in what follows, “Let brotherly love continue” (Hebrews 13:1).

The immovability of the kingdom which we receive, and the continuance of brotherly love, are our sun by day and moon by night, till both are perfected in “the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.” May we serve God acceptably and love our brethren continually.

From Scripture Truth 8(1916), pp. 18, 19; language updated and some references added.

Jacob & Sons

Genesis 32-35

F.B.Hole

Many blemishes disfigured the history of Jacob. His desire at the outset for the birthright, and the blessing of God which accompanied it, had been right: the way he had schemed to obtain them altogether wrong. God had been but little in his thoughts, and when, whilst fleeing from Esau's vengeance, he had discovered in a night vision at Bethel the house of God, he had felt it to be a dreadful place (Genesis 28:17). The hymn-writer Monod began his description of his soul's journey with the words, "All of self and none of Thee."¹ This may be paraphrased in Jacob's case as, "Nearly all of self and very little of Thee"!

Jacob served his relative Laban in upper Mesopotamia for many years, and left him furtively (see Genesis 31). But Laban caught up with him in the mountains of Gilead, and they agreed to go their separate ways (31:25ff). Immediately following this Jacob re-entered the promised land he had left so long before, and so the time had come when God would again deal directly with him, as formerly at Bethel.

Angels met Jacob as he entered the land (32:1). Not even this, however, freed him from the terror of the brother whom he had long before tricked out of their father's blessing (chapter 27). The prudential arrangements Jacob made for meeting his brother betray a bad conscience. The tidings that Esau, at the head of four hundred men, was coming to meet him, awoke his keenest fears, and he at once assumed that Esau was on his way to take vengeance. True to his nature, Jacob immediately worked out an elaborate scheme to placate his brother and secure himself. He divided all his possessions into two parts so that, if Esau was coming vengefully, at least half his considerable possessions would escape. And he also prepared a handsome present, reaching Esau in relays, to appease him (32:7,8,13-20).

But, thirdly, he also prayed, pleading God's promise of long before at Bethel (32:9-12). On his first visit to Bethel Jacob had done no more than register a vow (28:20); and so this prayer of chapter 32 is the first actual prayer of his that is put on record. It does not breathe the spirit of communion and intercession that had marked Abraham in chapter 18:22ff. It was simply a plea for preservation, while acknowledging God's mercies to him in the past. Yet we notice how rightly he took a low place, saying, "I am not worthy of the least of all Thy mercies" (32:10).

¹ Théodore Monod 1836-1921, "Oh the bitter shame and sorrow".

*the moment had come for him to be brought
face to face with God Himself*

It is a fact in all dispensations that one's sense of unworthiness and nothingness deepens as nearness to God increases. In relation to this, see Psalm 73:17, 22.

Jacob planned that Esau should meet his wives and sons first, whilst he (Jacob) was left alone, well to the rear (Genesis 32:23). Not a very dignified or courageous proceeding! Yet God was in all this, for, being left alone, the moment had come for him to be brought face to face with God Himself, that he might have an experience whose effect he would never lose.

Up to this point Jacob's life had mainly involved scheming against, and wrestling with, men. Now, alone at Jabbok, "there wrestled a man *with him*" (32:24). Doubtless at the start of this incident the unknown Stranger was to Jacob but a mere man – and who was Jacob to give way to another man? Hence it put him on his mettle to resist. The Stranger strove to break him down, and until the breaking of the day Jacob resisted. That the Stranger was no mere man was manifested by the powerful touch which, at the end, crippled Jacob at his strongest point.

At once Jacob's attitude changed. Instead of wrestling (which now had become impossible to him) he took to clinging to his Conqueror (32:26). He ceased his striving and took to trusting, realizing that the One who had overcome him had done so for his blessing, and that he was in the presence of God. The Name of the Stranger was not revealed, but the blessing that Jacob had desired from his youth (25:31ff; 27:19) was bestowed on him then and there: "He blessed him there" (32:29) – in the place of solitude with God, and when his natural power was crippled and laid low. The sought-for blessing of God had not come upon Him when he had struck that crafty bargain with Esau, or when he had deceived his own father to get it. No, it was when God dealt with him personally in solitude, and broke his stubborn will. In all this we may see a picture of how God deals with our souls in this day of richer grace than Jacob knew.

"Peniel" (32:31), means "The face of God". By giving the place this name Jacob disclosed his deep sense of having been brought face to face with God, and of the outcome having been preservation and not destruction. Here was good reason for him to revise his earlier thought that the house of God and the gate

God's thought towards us, even the most wayward of us, is blessing

of heaven was a “dreadful place” (28:17, KJV). In Peniel we see foreshadowed several striking things:

- First, in order to deal fully and finally with man, God Himself would stoop to become man, for it was as “a man” that Jacob saw God “face to face.”
- Second, God’s thought towards us, even the most wayward of us, is blessing.
- Third, human struggling and wrestling achieves nothing; and surrender or submission, with honesty in confession, is the way of blessing.
- Fourth, it was when clinging to the One who had vanquished him, and confessing that His name was Jacob (32:27) – meaning “Supplanter” – it was then that his name was changed to “Israel” meaning “Prince of God” – and that he was told that he had power not only with men but with God. By changing his name God claimed Jacob as belonging now to *Him*.

Thus a great moment in his personal history had been reached, and, as he realized that he had seen God face to face with salvation as the result, the sun rose upon him (32:31). An experience of this kind in the history of any soul does indeed mark the dawning of a new day. Jacob’s children were to be reminded of this part of their ancestor’s history by a simple dietary prohibition, as the last verse of the chapter records.

But as yet Jacob was hardly equal to his new name, so we do not find it used by the inspired historian until much later in his story. All his scheming character comes anew into display in chapter 33, carried through with a high degree of obsequiousness (v.3).

Esau’s attitude, however, was not what Jacob had expected. Esau’s anger (27:41) had cooled off during the intervening years, and he had become the leader of hundreds of men – a man of influence and large possessions. Though ultimately

surrender or submission, is the way of blessing

accepting Jacob's present, he at first declined it saying (literally), "I have much" (33:9).

Though Jacob described his gift to Esau as "my blessing" (33:11), he was by no means anxious to have Esau's company on his further journey. His plea, recorded in verse 13, was doubtless a genuine one, and it lends itself to an application amongst the people of God today. There are always to be found those who are young and tender, who must not be overdriven. Those who have reached the stature and activity of full-grown men must remember this, and not force their pace on their weaker brethren – to their undoing. Many a young and tender believer has been damaged by this kind of thing.

But once Esau had departed, Jacob again displays the crookedness that seems to have been his natural bent. Although he had told Esau, "I come unto my lord unto Seir," he promptly journeyed to Succoth, which lay in an entirely different direction (33:14, 17). Moreover, having arrived there, he built a house and made booths for his cattle, showing that he had a mind to settle down in the land rather than following in the footsteps of his grandfather Abraham and maintaining the character of a stranger.

But subsequently he removed to Shechem (33:18), across the Jordan and in the centre of the land. Here, though he had a tent and an altar, we can again discern that his separation from the people of the land was becoming impaired. He pitched his tent close to the city and then bought the land where he had encamped. The name he gave the altar that he built there, identified God by God's relationship to *him* ("El-elohe-Israel", i.e., God, the God of Israel) – even if he did use his own new name and not his old name.

The whole of chapter 34 is occupied with the unhappy results that sprang from the above-mentioned weakening of Jacob's separation from the world. Its effects for evil were not manifested in Jacob himself but in his family. The tide of evil runs in two broad channels: violence and corruption (Genesis 6:12, 13). The world is just the same today; and how often we have to hang our heads in shame and confess that a bit of "world-bordering" on our part, as Christian parents, has led to sorrow and even disaster in our families.

In our chapter (34:1ff) the corruption comes first, then the violence. His daughter, Dinah, wanted to enjoy the companionship and pleasures of the other young women of the land, and in result got entangled and defiled. This aroused Jacob's sons to rage, a rage not appeased by Shechem's and Hamor's attempt to repair the damage done. Simeon and Levi retaliated with atrocious violence (34:24ff) which was never forgotten by Jacob, for in the prophetic blessing which he pronounced upon his sons at the end of his life he denounced these

*God can turn that which was originally
a curse into a blessing.*

two sons, cursing their anger (49:5-7).

The shameful story of chapter 34 not only caused Jacob “to stink among the inhabitants of the land” (34:30) – a dreadful position for him, seeing that he was the only man in the land possessing the true knowledge of God. It also brought a judgment upon the descendants of the two promoters of the violence: see Jacob’s above-mentioned last words to his sons. It is, however, of interest to note that in later days the tribe of Levi so acted as to gain a special blessing, and in consequence we are permitted to see how God can turn that which was originally a curse into a blessing. The word had been, “I will divide them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel.” But in the case of Levi this was by being called to special service and scattered throughout all the tribes.²

The first verse of chapter 35 shows us how God intervened when things at Shechem had reached this sorry pass. He called Jacob back to the place where first He had made Himself known to him. There Jacob was to dwell, and there his altar was to be. At Bethel God had declared what He would be for and to Jacob, without raising any question as to Jacob’s response or behaviour. Now God is always true to Himself and to His word. These happenings occurred before God gave the law through Moses, and God was dealing with these patriarchs on the basis of His promises in grace. These promises would abide. God deals with us according to grace in the gospel today. Hence we read of, “this grace in which we stand” (Romans 5: 2) – which is equivalent to saying that our dwelling before God is in His grace or favour. As we dwell in the sense of His favour so shall we be led to approach Him in the spirit of worship, and to have done with all that is displeasing to Him. So it was –with Jacob, as we see here.

Immediately God called Jacob back to Bethel he realized that there were evil things in his household, even strange gods (cp. Genesis 31:34). There is no record of Jacob taking exception to them previous to this. But, with God before him, he at once became alive to the evil of them. They were to be “put away”, and his household was to be purified, this extending even to the garments they wore (35:2). The presence of God demands a purging which extends even to

² Simeon’s lot was to be assigned certain towns in the midst of the allotment of Judah (Joshua 19:1ff). (Ed.)

that which surrounds us: an important lesson that we all need to take to heart. However there was not an entirely clean break. The unclean things were not destroyed but only hidden away (35:4). Did Jacob hope to be able to realize their – probably considerable – value in some future day? The tendency of our foolish hearts is just the same. Let us see that we do not act in similar fashion with defiling things of the flesh and of the world that would naturally attract us. As Jacob went to Bethel God restrained the peoples of the land from taking vengeance on him and his household because of the violent action of his two sons (35:5); and so he safely got there, and built his altar. The name he gave it stands in contrast with the name he had given to his former altar. In previously naming an altar “God, the God of Israel” (33:20), he had identified God by His relationship with himself. Here he recognized Him as the God of His own dwelling-place – El Bethel (“God of the house of God”).

And here the promises of God were confirmed in a fresh appearance of the Almighty. Jacob’s new name was confirmed, and the land freshly confirmed to him. This moved him to set up another pillar in Bethel, in response to the revelation, and anoint it (35:9-15; cp.28:18). But on their journey towards Bethlehem Rachel died in childbirth, naming the baby boy “Son of my Sorrow”, and so typifying the setting-aside of the nation from whom Christ sprang. But Jacob re-named him: the sorrows of Rachel’s children (Jeremiah 31:15) would be swallowed up in the triumphs of the “Son of the Right Hand.”

This loss was followed by the disgraceful sin of Reuben: at this point sorrow indeed succeeded sorrow. And the closing verses record the death of his aged father, Isaac. The division of Genesis entitled, “The generations of Isaac,” began at chapter 25:19 and ends here.

An abridged and edited version of the article in Scripture Truth 36 (1948-50), pp. 251-6.



*There was not an entirely clean break,
The unclean things were not destroyed
but only hidden away*

The seven churches

Revelation 1:20 – 3:22

Theo Balderston

We are constantly assessing, sometimes criticising, the meetings or congregations that we are associated with. But what is the Lord's assessment of us? In Revelation 2:1 – 3:22 the Lord Himself dictated to John seven letters to be forwarded to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia (see 1:11). They make instructive reading for us.

Each letter is addressed to a mysterious personage called both “angel” and “star” (see 1:20). Who are they? One view is that each “angel” / “star” stands for the bishop or for “the responsible representatives of the assemblies before Christ.” The difficulty with either of these views is that in the letter to the church in Philadelphia only the angel is addressed throughout and no other element in the church is mentioned. Does this mean that the rest of the congregation is ignored? Not so: the letter to the church in Thyatira addresses the whole church, as the switch at the end of 2:23 from second-person singular to second-person plural embracing “the rest of you” shows (so, ESV, NIV). “Angel” includes a wide body of people in this church, but not so widely defined as to include “Jezebel.” Perhaps, then, we should regard “angel”, or “star” as standing for the nucleus of real believers, who are in Christ's hand. However this seemingly simple solution does not work for the church in Laodicea. Here the address to the angel includes the entire church (down to the end of 3:18 the letter is couched in the second-person singular). But in 3:16 the Lord says that He shall vomit the “angel” out of His mouth. This, surely, represents reprobation for all who would not “open the door” to the Lord (3:20). Since I believe that real believers can never perish (John 10:28f), I must conclude that the assembly in Laodicea were not generally genuine believers (except 3:20b-22). Therefore perhaps the seven “angels” / “stars” are best regarded as signifying the portion of each church that adhered

*We are constantly assessing,
sometimes criticising, the meetings
or congregations that we are associated with.*

*The temptation for Christian congregations
to condone immorality is very strong
in the present day*

to apostolic doctrine and practice, but that not all of them may be truly saved. Clearly the main challenge of the Letter to Ephesus is that we do not leave our first love. Though a few commentators think this to refer to love for each other, and though such love was important to John (see his first epistle), most commentators agree that 2:4 refers to a loss of “first love” for the Lord. To this writer’s mind the most illuminating OT parallel is in Jeremiah 2:2, “I remember you, the kindness of your youth, the love of your betrothal, when you went after me in the wilderness” (NKJV). Our minds often focus on the demoralisation at the Red Sea and the griping at Marah (Exodus 14:11; 15:24). But the main fact was that they had willingly left Egypt. They had given up all they knew for Jehovah, the covenant God of Israel. They talked much about going back, and indeed at one stage nearly did go back (Numbers 14:4); but in fact they didn’t.

The letter to the angel of the church in Smyrna fixes on two points: the richness of the works of these impoverished believers (in a wealthy city), and the persecution that they were about to suffer (2:10, 11). It is best to leave comment on this letter to the many believers today, worldwide, threatened by, or experiencing, persecution. The dread of what might happen, e.g., at night to a Christian village in the west-African lands just south of the Sahara, threatened by Boko Haram or similar, is unimaginable to us. But, with the collapse of Christendom, persecution in this country is going to increase in time to come. The church in Smyrna was also menaced by the slander [ESV] of a group who said they were Jews but were not (2:9). This group will be discussed in connection with 3:9 below.

Of the next two churches, that in Pergamum had a noble record of not denying the Lord’s name and of holding fast to His faith in the most adverse of circumstances (2:13). Similarly there was a wonderful outworking of faith in the church in Thyatira (2:19). Yet both tolerated immorality and idolatry; Thyatira worse than Pergamum, because she gave shelter to the self-styled prophetess, Jezebel, whose teachings had very dark aspects to it (2:20,24). In

tolerating these things both these churches compared poorly with the church in Ephesus (2:2,6), and in each of them the Lord rebukes those confessing the apostolic faith for their laxity. The temptation for Christian congregations to condone immorality is very strong in the present day, as the world's atheistic morality seeps in, painted (as it is) as more loving and inclusive.

The Lord's response in the case of Pergamum is incisive (2:16): here the "come quickly" is presumably to be interpreted in the light of 2:5 rather than 22:7, etc., i.e., as a present judgmental intervention. In the case of Thyatira, the Lord forewarns of this kind of severe and summary judgment for Jezebel and her "children." However on those (few, perhaps) who have kept clear of "Jezebel" no further burden is imposed; only that they hold fast till the Lord comes.

Apparently the church in Sardis followed the pattern of apostolic doctrine; there were no Nicolaitans or Jezebels. Nevertheless, speaking of it corporately, and despite the reputation it enjoyed elsewhere, it was largely dead – spiritually dead (3:1). Those who comprised it were urged to strengthen the things that remained, these "things" being perhaps their tepid commitment to apostolic doctrine. Perhaps this very command would awaken some to their need. On the other hand the few among them who did not have the smell of death on their clothes are called "names", because their "names" are in the book of life, and are promised to remain there (3:4,5). The "come as a thief" in 3:3 seems to parallel 16:15, and this suggests that the majority in Sardis would not be watching for the Lord's coming for His saints, and so in their case that "coming" would extinguished any hope of their salvation.

The church in Philadelphia parallels the church in Smyrna in that the Lord has no criticism to make of either. She had "kept His word, and not denied His name", that is, His true Deity (John 1:1), His eternal Sonship (1:18), His true, sinless Manhood (1 Timothy 2:5; Hebrews 4:15). But she also shared a big problem with Smyrna, namely, the constant opposition of a group of gentiles who claimed to be Jews (3:9; see also 2:9), but weren't. We can reconstruct the claims of this group from verse 7: namely, that they claimed to possess and control the use of the key of David. From Isaiah 22:21-23 we can deduce their main jibe, namely, that they alone were members of the "royal palace" of some spiritual "Judah," and they alone decided who could enter it and who was excluded from it. Whereas in fact it was John's addressees' who had the "open door" (3:8). The promise to the church in 3:12 is evidently the Lord's answer to these pseudo-Jews' jibes.

Or *were* they "pseudo-Jews"? Were they perhaps actual ethnic Jews, whose title to that name John anti-semitically disallowed, regarding the (increasingly

*The church in Philadelphia was also looking for
the Lord's coming*

gentile) church as “the true Israel”? The majority of commentators assert this. But they are wrong. One might have thought the meaning of the phrase, “... that say they are Jews and are not,” to be in itself perfectly clear. Indeed it is, and it is also reinforced by other, similarly unambiguous evidence. This evidence occurs in the letter that Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, wrote to the church in Philadelphia during his journey under arrest to Rome, sometime early in the second century. The letter contains the following paragraph:

“Now, if anyone preaches Judaism to you, pay no attention to him. For it is better to hear about Christianity from one of the circumcision, than Judaism from a Gentile. If both, however, fail to talk about Jesus Christ, they are to me tombstones and graves of the dead, on which only human names are inscribed. Flee, then the wicked tricks and suggestions of the prince of this world, lest his suggestions wear you down...”

In other words, some thirty (or perhaps more) years after John wrote down his Revelation, there were still gentiles in Philadelphia trying to convert people to their pseudo-Jewish sect. The clear sense of Revelation 2:9; 3:9 should be sufficient in itself, but the confirmation from Ignatius is a triple-lock on its meaning.

The church in Philadelphia was also looking for the Lord's coming. In 3:10 we should translate literally as “word of my patience”, rather than as “command to persevere” (see KJV; Darby N.Tr. W.Kelly). And in reply the Lord reminds them that He is coming quickly (3:10, 11). Here, unlike in 2:7 & 16, this is no unseen, purely “spiritual” and judgmental coming, but clearly to be understood in the light of 22:7, 12, 20. And He will come for them before the great tribulation: the words “kept from the hour” surely cannot mean, “preserved while it is happening”.

The letter to the angel of the church in Laodicea, similarly to that written to

*in reply the Lord reminds them that
He is coming quickly*

the angel of the church in Sardis, contains no criticism of Laodicea's wrong *doctrine* (3:14-22). The single indictment against this church concerns her "lukewarmness" (3:16). What is the difference between lukewarmness and deadness? Perhaps that lukewarmness is the more nauseous. The church in Laodicea made more of a pretence of living faith than that in Sardis. Hence the vivid metaphor, "I will vomit you out of my mouth" (3:16). The great majority in Laodicea (unlike Job but like many of us today) had made gold their hope, whether they would have admitted it or not (3:17; cp. Job 31:24). But, rather, all of them needed true gold, white garments, and eye-salve to perceive their own state. The Lord desired to enter every life, but only a few were going to repent and admit Him. These would enjoy the blessedness of true personal fellowship with Him (3:20), but only as individuals. One cannot read this Letter without feeling its challenge.

Indeed, every one of the seven letters is a challenge to ourselves. However, there is another way of viewing them. If we consider them in relation to each other, there is a clear correspondence between Ephesus that had "left its first love" (2:4), and Laodicea that was, purely and simply, lukewarm (3:15f). Ephesus had still had much genuinely to boast in, but did not, I think, boast; Laodicea did plenty of boasting, when she had nothing at all to boast about (3:17). That is to say, Laodicea was a version of what Ephesus would become if the signs of lovelessness towards the Lord, already evident in her, were not repented of and checked. The deliberate comparability of the two letters seems designed to depict a worsening trend in the history even of those who profess apostolic doctrine.

In a different way, Smyrna and Philadelphia correspond to each other. Neither church was reproved in any way. But both suffered persecution: in fact Smyrna was about to suffer a more severe persecution than Philadelphia (2:10; 3:10). And Philadelphia was not in a worse state spiritually than Smyrna, But she had only "a little strength" (3:8). In this case the comparability between the two letters seems intended to indicate a weakening trend in those who truly believe. This relationship between churches 1 & 7, and between churches 2 & 6, follows the literary pattern called a chiasm. Apply the same pairing principle to Pergamum and Sardis (even though this pair lacks the internal correspondences of the other two pairs) and we readily see that that Sardis was in a far worse state spiritually than Pergamum.

Every church saw the letters to all the others: the chiasm was evident to all. Moreover each already had a history of its own by the time the Lord dictated these letters: see 2:4,5, 13; 3:1-3, 10. (This observation supports the conclusion

The seven letters are a rebuke to the facile triumphalism of much present-day Christianity.

that the Revelation was received by John at the end of the apostolic age.) All the verses just cited support the conclusion that the “past” of the churches had been generally better than their “present;” no church is said to have improved over the years. And so the pattern in the three pairings mirrored the deteriorating tendency already evident in most of them. For us, living at the end of the church age, this pattern suggests that the spiritual state of those professing apostolic doctrine would deteriorate as time went on, till, at the end, it will either be very lukewarm (3:19f; cp. 2 Timothy 3), or very weak. The seven letters are a rebuke to the facile triumphalism of much present-day Christianity.

This sobering implication is supported by another point. If John’s unnamed messenger had sailed to Patmos to receive John’s book (as surely he must have), then, on his return, Ephesus would have been the nearest city of the seven to his point of disembarkation, unless he followed a very circuitous route back to the mainland. From there the order in which the Lord had dictated the letters suggests that the messenger proceed up the coast to Smyrna and Pergamum, then inland, south-east, on which route he would come, successively, to Thyatira, then Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. (Googling a map of the seven churches helps to clarify this point.) This route would need no doubling-back to produce the chiasmic pattern noted above. That this “rational route” produces the chiasmic pattern described suggests that the Lord selected these seven out of all the churches of Asia in order to inculcate this lesson of spiritual weakening as time went on.

A final point: the above pairing of six churches leaves one church solitary, the central church of the seven, Thyatira, the church with the Jezebel in it. If there is one “average” characterisation of the professing church through history, it is Thyatira. That, too, is very sobering.

If there is one “average” characterisation of the professing church through history, it is Thyatira

Paul's neglected letter

Galatians 3:26 – 5:6

T. Balderston

Continuing a series that began in January 2021.

Paul wrote the Letter to the Galatians because recent converts of his were being hard-pressed by Judaizers, purportedly Christian, into believing that his simple gospel of justification by faith alone was only half a gospel. They claimed that, in addition to believing in Christ crucified and risen, the men among them needed to be circumcised. Paul met the challenge of this “different gospel” (Galatians 1:6) by rehearsing the story of his own conversion and subsequent history, by rehearsing the story of the Galatians’ own conversion and the evidences of the gifts of the Spirit that had accompanied it, and, most vitally of all, by taking them through Old-Testament Scriptures which proved that justification in the sight of God really is by faith alone (3:6-14). Abraham had been assured of this (3:6) some four hundred and thirty years before the Law had been declared from Sinai (3:16-17), and God could not have subsequently amended what He had declared to Abraham.

This naturally raised the question why ever the Law had been given at all? In this Letter Paul’s answer to this question was that it had been a temporary arrangement, designed to keep Israel from the worst sins of the gentiles until the right time should arrive for Christ to be born (3:19-25). During that period God protected Israel morally from the vile excesses of the pagans by subjecting them to the Law of Moses. To illuminate this, Paul employs the metaphor of the control over young sons of wealthy Greek families that was delegated to a household slave, or *paidagōgos* (“minder” might be the modern word for it). The *paidagōgos* had to steer them away from wrong and keep them in check (3:24). Such boys were indeed sons of wealthy fathers, but did not enjoy the associated liberty until they reached their mid- or later teens. So also Israel under the Law. However the [epoch of] Law had ceased as soon as [the epoch of] faith had

*justification in the sight of God
really is by faith alone*

the epoch of Law ceased at the cross.

arrived (3:25). That is to say, the epoch of Law ceased at the cross. Believing Jews were no longer governed by the dread rule of the Law.

How did Paul prove this? He follows verse 25 with the affirmation, “For you are all sons of God through faith in Jesus Christ” (3:26). The “you” in this sentence is all Galatian believers, whether of gentile or Jewish origin. The “for” in this sentence shows that it gives the reason why 3:25 is true, i.e., why Jewish believers are no longer under the control of the Law, namely, because all, Jewish as well as Gentile, Galatian believers are now the “sons” of God come of age. To demonstrate this he cites the fact that in becoming believers, whether from Jewish or gentile backgrounds, they had all received the same baptism (3:27), and in that baptism had recognised that through Christ’s death they had all died to their former lives, whether Jewish or gentile (see also Romans 6:3-5). They had “put on Christ”, and His risen life was the life that mattered.

In these verses Paul is not saying that baptism saved them. Indeed, in Galatians 2:16 and 3:6 he is as clear as he can be that faith alone saves us. But after they had been saved, they had been baptised, all in exactly the same way, and all with the same import, namely, of dying to the old man that they all had inherited from Adam (whether *via* the Jewish or the gentile route), and were now acknowledging only the “new man” that they are in Christ as valid before God. For being “in Christ” means that all that Christ has, as risen Man, is ours too.¹ He, as risen Man, is Heir of all things; and by being “in Him,” we share in that “heirship” too. And, as we shall shortly see, the end of the epoch of Law brings us into a relationship with God of adopted sons through the Lord Jesus Christ, a relationship whose fulness we often undervalue.

The first three verses of chapter 4 rehearse again the main points made in 3:23 – 25 in order to provide background for Paul’s astonishment that they had even gone over to observing the Hebrew sacred year (4:9, 10). Verses 1 & 2 rehearse the point already made regarding Israel under the Law, but verse 3 expresses the servitude, to which the people of Israel had then been subjected, slightly differently. Whereas in 3:23 it had been due to the guardianship of the Law; here, it is regarded as bondage to “the elements of the world.” The word for

¹ More discussion of Galatians 3:28 appeared in the article in the October, 2021, issue.

*being “in Christ” means that all that Christ has,
as risen Man, is ours too.*

“elements” (*stoicheia*) is used by Paul in this verse and in verse 9 of the same chapter; and also in Colossians 2:8, 20. In 2 Peter 3:10,12 it seems to signify the chemical elements (or perhaps the heavenly bodies) of which the physical universe is composed. Here, to judge by 4:10, *stoicheia* seems to refer to the high days of the Hebrew “sacred year”, and their link to the harvest year. They are so termed because they belong to the old creation.

Verse 4 spells out the transition from law to liberty that was briefly alluded to in 3:25. It happened at “the fulness of the time”, a phrase reminiscent of the Lord’s words, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand...” (Mark 1:15). At that time “God sent forth His Son”. Why did “the fulness of the time” happen then? Was it because it marked the near-fulfilment of Daniel’s seventy weeks? (Daniel 9:21ff; Luke 1:26) Or the completion of God’s testing of man, whether without government or under government, without His Law or under His Law, thereby demonstrating mankind’s inability to please Him, and that nothing but grace could save man? Or was it simply the right time for the “resurrection age” to commence, the epoch that runs between Christ’s resurrection and the resurrection of all His people? Whatever the answer, the verb, “send forth” marks a “sending forth” from heaven, just as the “sending forth” of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 4:6) was also from heaven. Therefore in 4:4 Paul surely also intends the thought of a sending-forth from the glory of God’s presence; and thereby emphasises the Self-humbling of the Son in being born of woman (i.e., into manhood: cp. Job 14:1). The “fulness of the time” here corresponds to “the end of the ages” in Hebrews 9:26.

And, as we have already seen, by Himself being “born under law” Christ could “redeem those who were under the Law” from the penalty due for their infraction of it (4:5; cp. 3:13), so that God might “adopt” believing Jews and gentiles as His sons and heirs (4:5,7).

Here Paul enters more into the substance of this sonship. Note that as evidence of it Paul does not here appeal to miracles that the Galatian saints had performed (3:5), but rather to the Christian’s instinctive desire to call God “Abba”, a desire evidently shared by his addressees (4:6). In a parallel passage John defines the

*“Abba” is the word that the Lord Jesus
Himself used in Gethsemane*

“little children” of the Christian faith as those who “have known the Father” (1 John 2:13). “Abba” does not, it seems, answer to the child’s “daddy,” but it does seem to have been an intimate, family name for a father. It is the word that the Lord Jesus Himself used in Gethsemane (Mark 14:36), and real Christians feel a wonderful propriety in so addressing God. And this proves that they are no longer slaves, but adopted sons (Galatians 4:7).

This being so, Paul is entirely astonished by his addressees’ intention to observe “days and months and seasons” (4:9f). To Paul, and now that Christ had come, these festivals were obsolete because they marked the stages of the year of the old creation before sonship had come (cp. 4:3,5). Presumably his addressees were beginning to observe the Israelite festal year as prescribed in Leviticus 23, no doubt as instructed by the interloping Judaizing teachers.

But wasn’t Paul being unreasonable here? The Israelite festal year exclusively worshipped Jehovah, the living God: could it be so wrong for these Galatian converts to join in? Paul affirms here that it was wrong. Believers have been delivered out of “this present evil age” (1:4); keeping the Jewish feasts affirmed that age. Believers are a “new creation” (6:15); the Levitical year celebrated the old creation. The feasts had been given by God, but for people still in bondage to “the elements of this world”: why would believers baptised into Christ as risen (3:27) still want to observe them? A “hard saying”, perhaps; but it is Scripture.

There may have been a further point to Paul’s concern. If Paul’s errant converts were observing “days and months and seasons,” that would include the rule that adult Israelite males present themselves before God at the tabernacle / temple three times a year (Exodus 23:17; Deuteronomy 16:16). Perhaps diaspora Jews didn’t keep this injunction to the letter, but huge numbers of them did go up to Jerusalem to keep the great feasts (e.g., Acts 2:5ff). If Paul’s backslidden converts did likewise, then these trips to Jerusalem would become the high-points of their “sacred year.”

Paul appears to be responding to this danger in 4:21-25. He tells them an “allegory” concerning Hagar, the slave-girl whom Sarah had given to Abraham

Believers are a “new creation”; the Levitical year celebrated the old creation.

as wife when she herself remained barren (Genesis 16). Hagar's son, Ishmael, was born entirely naturally (16:4), whereas, eventually, Sarah's son was born supernaturally, and according to promise (18:11ff). Paul treats the two women as symbolic of two covenants. In particular Hagar sets forth the Sinaitic covenant (Hagar and Ishmael were associated with Arabia – Genesis 16:1; 21:20f). However in this “allegory” Paul is not, as in 3:19-25, speaking of the Law as God had given it temporarily to keep the Israelites' sinful instincts in check pending the coming of the Seed. We can deduce this from the fact that in his allegory Hagar represents not only Sinai, but also “Jerusalem that now is” (4:25). That is to say, she represents the Jerusalem that is claiming scrupulously to observe the Law whilst rejecting Christ and persecuting His true servants (4:29).

This earthly Jerusalem was not the “mother” of true believers! Their mother is Jerusalem above, the heavenly Jerusalem! And therefore his readers should not subject themselves to earth-bound feasts tied to the harvest year.

The citation of Isaiah 54:1 in Galatians 4:27 is a puzzle on any interpretation. The heavenly Jerusalem surely cannot by any stretch be described as “barren” and “desolate”! Moreover, Paul was writing to “those who desired to be under the Law” (4:21), and surviving Jewish interpretation from shortly after the apostolic period confirms that it understood Isaiah 54:1 to refer to the earthly, Palestinian Jerusalem. If Paul had meant to interpret it of a heavenly Jerusalem, he would have had to defend his re-interpretation against the scorn of the Judaizing “minders” of his Galatian readers.

Therefore I think it must be concluded that the “for” at the start of verse 27 links it to v.25, not to v.26, and explains how the present, hostile, earthly Jerusalem will yet become God's Jerusalem again, once she has penitently acknowledged her King. The earthly Jerusalem of Paul's time had become “barren,” not (as with Sarah²) in order to make the outworking of promise miraculous, but in the sense of bearing no fruit for God. And that earthly Jerusalem was soon

² Note that Paul does not use the actual words “barren” and “desolate” of Sarah in his “allegory”.

to be desolate too, as the Lord Himself had foretold (Matthew 24:2; Luke 21:20ff.). And yet the earthly Jerusalem did bear fruit, albeit against her own will: the result of her refusal and crucifixion of Christ was a gospel through whom myriads were being saved. And the corollary of Jerusalem's desolation has, over the last two millennia, been the "birth" of innumerable believers in Jesus – far more than were saved during the Old-Testament dispensation. The renewed earthly Jerusalem-to-come will then rejoice with a rejoicing that will have everlasting contrition as its obverse side (Zechariah 12:10).

4:28 resumes the "allegory" and picks up from verse 22 in order to draw a lesson from Genesis 21:8-10. Verses 29 & 30 are intended as a hint to his readers to expel the law-teachers who were corrupting the gospel.

In the first five verses of chapter 5 Paul draws his reasonings with the Galatians to a close. His general summary of the letter to this point is in the words, "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (ESV). To modern ears this first part of this verse could sound like a stirring endorsement of the principles of the American Declaration of Independence and the French Revolution. But the key to its meaning is in the word "slavery". "Freedom" and its cognates in the Greek Old Testament almost always concern the liberation of slaves. This is Paul's point, the "slavery" of pagans to nameless fears, and of Judaism to the Law, being in view. The "freedom" that he has in mind is into a relationship to a father, i.e., a freedom that innately desires to please the Father. Given this understanding, any hint of conflict between this Christian "freedom" and seeking to do the Father's will dissolves.

The Galatians, or some of them, had, been swayed by the idea that circumcision made them "more proper" followers of Jesus. Paul viewed it as bondage, because circumcision was a "work" of the Law (Leviticus 12:3). His final warning to them was blunt: if you adopt the teachings of the law-teachers and become circumcised, you cannot be saved; if you seek to improve on justification by faith by law-keeping you will be estranged from Christ and will have fallen from grace (Galatians 5:2-4). This might seem to teach a "saved and lost" doctrine contrary to John 10:27ff. But God can use warnings of this sort to arouse the truly saved to the danger of the error they are dabbling with, and to warn the merely lip-service "Christians."



The Importance of God's Word: Meditations on Psalm 119

by Truth for Today team

(David Anderson, Ian Britton, Brian Donaldson, Yannick Ford, David Hughes,
Jonathan Hughes, Gordon Kell, Pete Ollerhead, David Pulman, George Stevens,
Paul Thomson and Stephen Thomson);

Compiled and Edited by David Anderson;

ISBN: 978-0-901860-99-6; paperback; 254 pages;

R.R.P. £12.50; STP price: £9.50 + P&P

Published: 30 October 2021; Kindle edition available

This book is an edited compilation of the transcripts of all the talks by *Truth for Today*, *The Bible Explained*, which were broadcast during the period September 2017 - March 2020. As several of the speakers referred to the structure of Psalm 119 during their talk, these comments have been collated, condensed, and incorporated into the Introduction of this book.

As many people know, Psalm 119 is the longest of the psalms — it has 176 verses — as well as being the longest chapter in the Bible. Perhaps for that reason all 176 verses are seldom, or never, read completely - either in public or private meditation. It is divided into 22 stanzas (or sections) of 8 verses each, with each stanza corresponding to one of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. It is a so-called 'acrostic' psalm. For example, in the original Hebrew text, verses 1-8 of Psalm 119 all start with a Hebrew letter ALEPH (English "a"); and so on. The meaning of these Hebrew letters often plays a role in being the dominant theme of the stanza. This was probably a memory aid, as it is a lot easier to memorise things if you can attach them to a simple structure in your mind. Of course, it's very difficult to reproduce this effect in an English translation!

What is Psalm 119 all about? Really, just one theme — the excellency and value of the Word of God. For Christian believers, the Word of God not only furnishes us with a knowledge of the living God, but it also speaks of the Christ who has revealed Him. In John 1:1-14, Jesus Christ is called "the Word". He is "the Alpha and Omega" (Revelation 1:8, 11; 21:6; 22:13) — the "A-Z" of God.



The Contrast

The glory of the kingdom spread
over the mountain's lofty head,
lighting the rocky steeps;
and Jesu's robes were glistening white,
His face – the sun in all its might
– and Peter sleeps!

'Tis night, and in Gethsemane
a prostrate form in agony,
with bitter crying, weeps:
the darkness deepens at His groan
– the darkest night this earth has known*
– and Peter sleeps!

He lies upon the dungeon floor;
the guard, quadrupled, round the door
its midnight vigil keeps;
two chains of iron bind him fast,
tomorrow's morn shall be his last
– and Peter sleeps!

* *Luke 22:53.*

From Edward L. Bevir, *Poems* (Altrincham, c.1925), p.16.