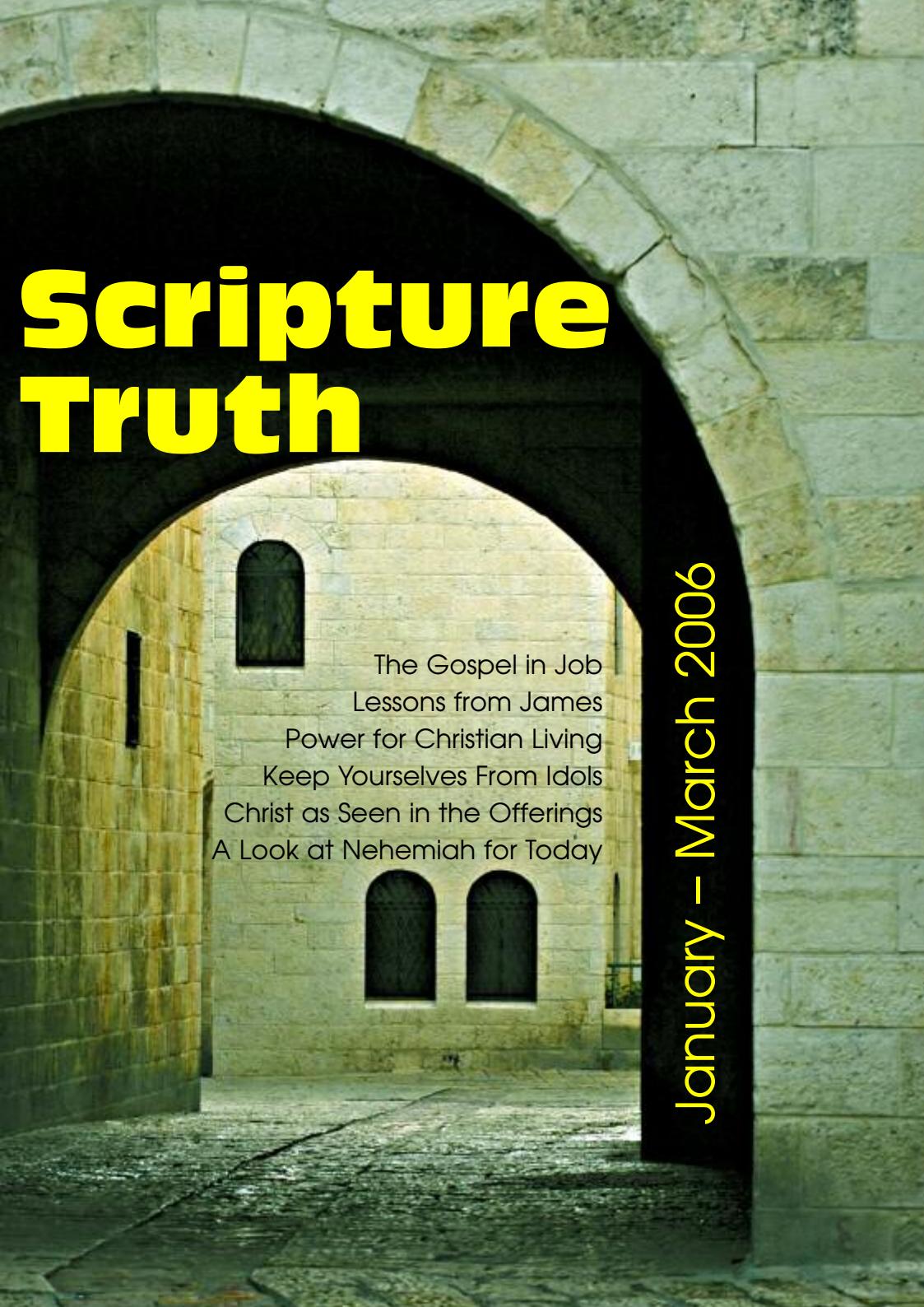


Scripture Truth



The Gospel in Job
Lessons from James
Power for Christian Living
Keep Yourselves From Idols
Christ as Seen in the Offerings
A Look at Nehemiah for Today

January - March 2006

SCRIPTURE TRUTH

Editor: Gordon Hughes

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 2006
£9.50 Post Free UK – £11.50 Post Free Overseas

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SCRIPTURE TRUTH is the imprint of the Central Bible Hammond Trust

Registered Charity No. 223327

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Christ as Seen in the Offerings

Anthony Brett

"All things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me" (Luke 24:44) were Jesus' words to the two on the road to Emmaus. These notes were originally prepared for a young peoples' Bible study. It was felt that they deserved a wider audience. They are presented in their original note form and will repay careful study.

The burnt offering (Leviticus 1:1-17; 6:8-13)

A sweet savour (or, aroma) offering (vv.9,13,17).

Voluntary, total, unswerving devotion to God. Jesus in death presenting Himself to God to accomplish the will and glory of God. It is the God-ward aspect of the cross. Christ perfectly glorifying God in all His holiness and fully satisfying His heart and affections. On such a solid foundation, everything that God intends to do can be brought to pass.

"Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God" (Hebrews 9:14); "I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do" (John 17:4).

The person who brings the offering is prominent. He offers the animal, lays his hands on it, kills it, flays it, divides it and washes it. This required time and energy on the part of the offerer. Only if it was a bird would the priest kill it.

The offering could be a bullock, goat, sheep, ram, lamb, turtle dove or young pigeon. The animal was divided into pieces. Three particular parts are mentioned; Scriptures in the New Testament seem to correspond with these:

The legs. Action, movement: "Christ...who did no sin" (1 Peter 2:21,22).

The head. Thought, mind: "Christ...who knew no sin" (2 Corinthians 5:20,21).

The inwards. Motive, what is inherent: "...in Him there is no sin" (1 John 3:5).

In the offerings, the purity and holiness of the Lord Jesus is constantly emphasised.

"Christ also has loved us, and has given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet smelling savour" (Ephesians 5:2).

The offerer was to "lean with his hand" (v.4, see JND note) on the sacrifice and so was accepted by God because of the value of the sacrifice. We are "accepted in the Beloved" (Ephesians 1:6).

So near, so very near to God,
More near I cannot be;

*Christ...an
offering and
a sacrifice to
God for a
sweet
smelling
savour*

For in the person of His Son
I am as near as He.
So dear, so very dear to God,
More dear I cannot be.
The love with which He loves His Son,
Such is His love to me.

The meal offering (*Leviticus 2:1-16; 6:14-23*)

A sweet savour offering (vv.2,9,12).

“A living sacrifice” – Jesus as a perfect Man presenting to God an unblemished life, always gladly obedient and devoted. In an otherwise desolate wilderness, He grew “up before Him as a tender plant, and as a root out of dry ground” (*Isaiah 53:2*).

This offering consisted of fine flour or green ears of corn, with salt, oil and frankincense. Honey and leaven were specifically excluded. It was a bloodless sacrifice.

Fine flour. No imperfections or roughness. A pure, even life. The Bread of God (*John 6:33*).

Oil. The Holy Spirit. *“Mixed with oil”* (v.4): Conceived of the Holy Spirit (*Matthew 1:20*). *“Anointed with oil”* (v.4): Anointed by the Holy Spirit (*Acts 10:38*).

Frankincense. A fragrant resin, all of which had to be burned. His was a fragrant life offered to God.

Salt. Moral incorruption.

It is also called the “most holy of the offerings” (v.10). It points to the life of the Lord Jesus. The Holy Spirit always guards His purity and sinlessness.

This offering appears to have been prepared at home (v.1). Do I spend time at home in this way reading about the life and feelings of the Lord Jesus? Have I begun to appreciate just how attractive the life of the Lord Jesus was to His Father?

Three ways of preparing the offering are mentioned. They might be interpreted as follows:

“Baked in the oven” (v.4): The early, private life of the Lord Jesus – unseen by anyone except God.

“Baked in a pan” (v.5): The public life of the Lord Jesus – “parted in pieces” (v.6) as recorded in the four Gospels.

“Baked in the frying pan” (v.7): The final few hours of the Lord’s life – the intense heat and testing of Calvary.

The peace offering (*Leviticus 3:1-17; 7:11-21, 28-35*)

A sweet savour offering (vv.5,16).

It is appropriate that this offering follows the burnt offering and the meal offering. It was a fellowship offering with its portion for God, for the priest and for the offerer.

The death of Christ is the basis and material of communion, whether for God, the assembly, or any individual member of the priestly family (the Christian company).

First there is that which is called the food of the offering (vv.11,16). It was all burned on the altar. The fat and the inwards – God alone can fully appreciate the value of the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus.

There is also a portion for the priest who offers the sacrifice – the breast (7:31), which speaks of the love of the Lord Jesus, is waved as an offering before the Lord. Aaron and his sons could then eat it.

Then there is the thigh or shoulder (7:32) which is “heaved” before the Lord. It required energy. The priest who officiated could then eat the thigh.

Finally, the rest of the sacrifice could then be eaten by the person who brought the offering with his friends and family. It could be eaten on the same day and the next day but, if any was left on the third day, it had to be burned. We cannot allow our fellowship with the Lord to get stale.

Many share in this offering. God must be given what belongs to Him first, but then His people can feast on the value and preciousness of the life and death of His Son. Do I?

The sin offering (Leviticus 4:1-35; 6:24-30)

Jesus on the cross made sin for us. The judgment of God borne and exhausted. Sin condemned in the holy sacrifice of Christ. Like the meal offering and the trespass offering, it is “most holy”. “When You make His soul an offering for sin” (Isaiah 53:10) clearly identifies this offering with the sacrifice of Christ.

The offering varied according to the responsibility and position of the individual. A priest or ruler would be more responsible than an ordinary person. Even sins of ignorance had to be met with sacrifice. The standard is not conscience or my knowledge or understanding but God’s holiness which is absolute.

Only the fat of the offering was burnt on the altar and went up as a sweet smelling savour (N.B. the word for ‘burn’ in v.10 is the same as in 1:9 but is different from that used in 4:12.) Most of the blood was poured out at the foot of the altar of burnt offering. The carcass was burnt outside the camp (cf. Hebrews 13:11,12).

It is impossible to overestimate the solemnity of this offering. “[God] made [Jesus] who knew no sin to be made sin for us” (2 Corinthians 5:21). Because of this, the Lord Jesus was forsaken by His God whom He had served so faithfully. “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?...But You are holy” (Psalm 22:1,3; Matthew 27:46). The Lord Jesus had been made what was altogether abhorrent to God (though He personally never ceased to be delightful to His Father) and was judged because of it. His purity and perfection exhausted the judgment, completely atoning for sin. On

*We cannot
allow our
fellowship
with the
Lord to get
stale*

the basis of this offering, God is entirely just in clearing the guilty who have faith in His Son.

John the Baptist introduces us to “the Lamb of God who bears away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). The value of His sacrifice is such that the evil root of sin will be entirely cleared from God’s creation!

The trespass offering (Leviticus 5:1-19; 7:1-10)

Sins and transgressions against God or man met by Christ’s sacrifice. The sin offering deals with the evil root or nature; the trespass offering deals with the evil fruit produced. So in Leviticus 5, various wrong actions are listed. All sins are against God but some are also against another person. In the case of an offence against a neighbour, full restitution had to be made plus a fifth added. So prophetically the Lord would say, “Though I have stolen nothing, I still must restore it” (Psalm 69:4).

Confession is also mentioned (v.5). “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). Some of the blood of the sacrifice is sprinkled around on the altar and the rest poured out at the foot of the altar. It is always true that without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins (Hebrews 9:22).

Like the meal offering and the sin offering, it is “most holy...The trespass offering is like the sin offering; there is one law for them both” (Leviticus 7:1,7).

The red heifer (Numbers 19:1-22)

While it is certain that our sins have been eternally dealt with by the death of the Lord Jesus, it is also true that, as Christians, we will also fail and become defiled, perhaps inadvertently, by all the evil that is around us. This particular sacrifice was available to the Israelites as they went through the wilderness. Again, an unblemished animal was killed and burnt outside the camp, along with cedar (picture of man’s glory), hyssop (picture of man’s lowliness) and scarlet (symbol of earthly glory). The ashes were gathered and stored and mixed with running water (picture of the word of God which lives (1 Peter 1:23)). They were then applied to the individual who had been defiled. He could then enjoy again the relationship which had been disturbed.

The drink offering (Exodus 29:40-42; Numbers 15:1-13; 28:7)

The joy of God and man in the voluntary life and death seen in the perfect obedience of the Lord Jesus. This offering was of “strong wine” and oil and was poured out before the Lord in the Holy Place. The oil and the wine were always in equal amounts. Does this indicate that our joy (the wine) is proportionate to the work of the Holy Spirit (the oil) in us?

A drink offering was to accompany the “morning and evening burnt offering”. It could, in fact, only be offered with a burnt offering or a meal offering. We are constantly pointed back to the perfect life and sacrificial death of the Lord Jesus as the basis for our salvation, blessing, fellowship, peace and joy.

Lessons from James

Part 3 – Chapter 3:1 - 4:10

Gordon Hughes

“The tongue of the righteous is choice silver...but the perverse tongue will be cut out” (Proverbs 10:20,31). The ever practical James still challenges all of us as to how we use this important member of our body.

I well remember that, as a boy, when other children would say nasty things about me, I would chant the well-known rhyme,

Sticks and stones may break my bones
But names will never hurt me.

That was often an act of bravado because, underneath, it really did hurt. Children, and adults, can be so cruel to each other at times. But, besides giving pain, the words we say can also bring joy. You may remember that magical moment when your spouse to be first whispered those words, “I love you”! As we continue our studies in this very practical book of James, we shall see that he has some very important things to say about these tongues of ours. With some 28 verses to cover, we will be able only to look at some principal features. It will be convenient to deal with these under three headings.

Trouble with the tongue (3:1-12)

James begins with a warning to those who teach the word of God. That’s a very great privilege but also an awesome responsibility. Preachers above all must practise what they preach! James recognises, however, that we all fail, and adds, “For we all stumble in many things. If any one does not stumble in word, he is a perfect (or, mature) man, able also to bridle the whole body” (v.2).

This James, we believe, was one of the half-brothers of the Lord Jesus, born to Joseph and Mary after the Lord’s miraculous virgin birth. He had not always been an ardent follower of the Lord Jesus. How often he must have regretted those words we read of in Mark 3:21: “When [Jesus’] family heard about this, they went to take charge of Him, for they said, “He is out of His mind”. What cruel words! Perhaps it was seeing the Lord on the cross which brought about James’ conversion. Certainly, Luke tells us that, after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, His disciples met together in an upper room in Jerusalem. Luke adds, “These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, *and with His brothers*” (Acts 1:14).

After this, James rose to a position of some prominence in the early church. When difficulties about the Law and circumcision threatened to split the early church into two – a Jewish church and a Gentile church – a conference was called in Jerusalem. After

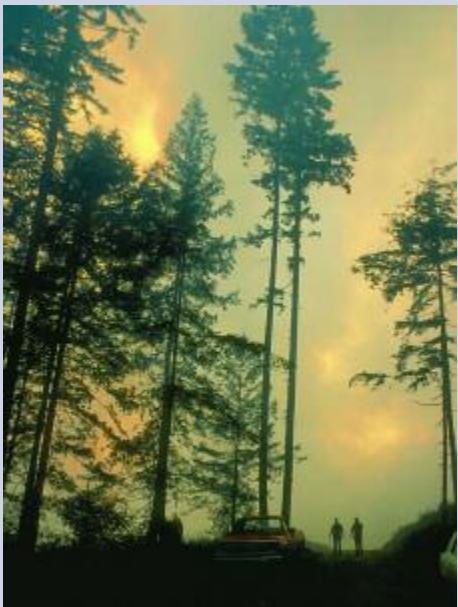
the issues had been debated, it was James who summed up the situation. Luke tells us, “And after they had become silent, James answered, saying, “Men and brethren, listen to me: Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name...Known to God from eternity are all His works. Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God” ” (see Acts 15). What powerful, healing words were those! So James writes out of first hand experience of the power of the tongue – for evil and for good. James then gives two illustrations of the tremendous power of small things. Firstly the bit, that bar of steel only a few inches long, yet by it the rider controls a powerful horse, urging it in the right direction. Secondly, the ship’s rudder, tiny in comparison with the enormous size of the ship and hidden away under the sea, yet it directs that giant liner in the direction the captain chooses. He then adds these telling words, “Even so, the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so” (vv.5-10).

James’ words are so plain and pointed. They scarcely need further comment. Winston Churchill, a master with words, is reported as saying, “The power of man has grown in every sphere except over himself”. Those words are particularly true in the sphere of the tongue. Moses, the meekest man in all the earth as Scripture describes him (Numbers 12:3), in an unguarded moment, “spoke rashly with his lips” (Psalm 106:33). That moment of anger lost Moses his place in the Promised Land! “No man can tame the tongue”, James has said. But what man cannot do, God can! So Jesus could say, “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible”. When a deaf mute was brought to Jesus, Jesus touched his tongue and said, “Be opened”. So Mark tells us, “His tongue was loosed, and he spoke plainly”. No doubt his voice was joined with the others who said, “He has done all things well” (Mark 7:31-37). What the Lord Jesus did for that man in a physical sense, He is able to do for us today in loosening our tongues from bad ways so that we might become mouthpieces for Him. James goes on to describe the tongue as being full of deadly poison. This is no over-statement! How many friendships have been poisoned, how many reputations ruined by one small careless word. We might smile at the children’s rhyme, but it has a serious message:

I lost a very little word, only the other day;
It was a very naughty word I had not meant to say.

But, then, it was not really lost – when from my lips it flew,
My little brother picked it up, and now he says it too!

We need to make David's prayer our own: "Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips" (Psalm 141:3). Or, in the words of Francis Ridley Havergal,



*See how great a forest
a little fire kindles!*

"Take my lips, and let them be
Filled with messages from Thee."

Let our Pattern in this, as in every department of life, be the Lord Jesus Himself. When He spoke in the synagogue at Nazareth, we read, "So all bore witness to Him, and marvelled at the gracious words which proceeded out of His mouth" (Luke 4:22).

Winning with wisdom (3:13-18)

In this small but important section, the ever practical James emphasises the importance of good conduct, characterised by wisdom. It will not lead to "bitter envy and self-seeking" (v.14). That kind of behaviour springs from another wisdom, of which James solemnly declares, "This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing will be there" (vv.15,16). Let's be on our

guard! More than ever today, the devil is looking for those through whom he can work his evil designs in this world. He knows that his time is short – the Lord Jesus is coming soon to take His church home to heaven to be with Himself for ever. Let none of us, knowingly or unknowingly, be found doing the devil's work!

Then, as James turns from this sad picture of demonic wisdom, the picture is transformed, as so often happens in Scripture, by that little word 'but'. "But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace" (vv.17,18). Here, like the sevenfold fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22,23) are seven characteristics of the wisdom from above. It is worth looking at each of these in turn.

Pure. Today, more than ever, we are besieged by the media presenting their messages of impurity. Newspapers, television soaps, billboards lining our streets – all these pro-

claim a lifestyle that is contrary to biblical teaching. We need that pure wisdom from above.

Peaceable. “If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men”, writes Paul (Romans 12:18). We need to pray, “Lord, make me a channel of Your peace”. It is said that Cardinal Newman once had to say to Pusey, “You have discharged your olive branch from a catapult”? That’s certainly not the way to do it!

Gentle. Are we ready to make allowances for others – strict with our own failings and weaknesses but gentle as to others? Alas! Too often it is the other way round!

Willing to yield. It is all too easy for me to think that my views and opinions are the only right ones. Am I ready to listen to, and accept, the views of others, saying to myself, “I might be wrong”? So Paul could write, “Let your sweet reasonableness be known to all men. The Lord is at hand” (Philippians 4:5).

Full of mercy and good fruits. It has been said that, while grace gives us what we did not deserve, mercy spares us from what we do deserve. This wisdom will never seek to get its own back for some wrong suffered, real or imaginary. “...those who have believed in God should be careful to maintain good works. These things are good and profitable to men” (Titus 3:8). Only this wisdom from above will enable me to be a good neighbour, to be a good friend, to be a good listener, to be full of good fruits.

Without partiality. What strong words James had to say in ch.2 against those in the church who would welcome the rich man with his gold rings and fine clothing but scarcely find room for the poor man in filthy clothes! He concludes, “If you show partiality, you commit sin” (vv.1-10). Plain speaking indeed! Yet how easy it is to be affected by what is merely outward and superficial!

Without hypocrisy. Some of the harshest words uttered by the Lord Jesus were spoken against the Pharisees for their hypocrisy (see Matthew 23). He likens them to “white-washed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness” (v.27). By contrast, He was totally transparent, totally real, totally true.

Don’t you long for that wisdom from above? It would be heaven on earth if we were all characterised by it. But how do we obtain it? James himself has already provided the answer: “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting” (1:5,6). Lord, evermore give us this wisdom!

Defeating the devil (4:1-10)

Wars, fights, lusts, murder, coveting – in these sorry terms does James describe the Christian church at that time. And still today, many of us experience the sadness of quarrelling and division, despite the fact that the Lord Jesus left us His special command to love one another (John 13:34,35)! Why this terrible contrariness? James seems to highlight two reasons – selfish prayers (v.3) and friendship with the world (v.4).

"You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures" (v.3). So often, alas, our prayers seem largely to be made up of requests for our needs that day. Of course, it is good to bring to God even the smallest details of our lives and share with Him our concerns and fears. He is interested in every part of our lives. But we need to spend more time thinking about the greatness of God and praising Him for what He has already done for us, and then bring to Him the concerns and needs of our brothers and sisters in Christ. In that way, as we begin to see them as He sees them, we might be less likely to quarrel with them and more likely to love them!

"Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?" James' Jewish listeners would be well aware of the fact that, frequently in the Old Testament, God charged the Israelites with adultery because they had turned away from Himself to serve other gods. Our unfaithfulness grieves Him deeply. That is why, in v.5, James writes, "The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously". The Holy Spirit indwells each believer in Christ and, as such, is a mark, or seal, of Christ's ownership. In the best sense of the word, that Holy Spirit is jealous for our affections. He desires that our love be centred on the Lord Jesus alone.

Yes, we still have to live in this world. The Lord Jesus has left us here to serve Him in it. We need to be friendly to those whom we meet. Only in this way can we show them something of His love. But that does not mean that we fit in with their sinful ways simply to be one of them. The Lord Jesus was known as the Friend of tax collectors and sinners (Matthew 11:19) though, at the same time, He is described as "separate from sinners" (Hebrews 7:26). He was not part of their sinful ways.

James seems to be asking a lot of his readers and of us today – dealing with these troublesome tongues, showing that wisdom from above, defeating the devil. "Who is sufficient for these things?" we ask with Paul (2 Corinthians 2:16). James gives us the answer in v.6: "He gives more grace". Whatever the need, the grace of God is more than sufficient to meet it! Paul had to learn that lesson. After asking God three times to remove his thorn in the flesh, with apparent lack of success, he had this important message from the Lord Himself: "My grace is sufficient for you" (2 Corinthians 12:7-10).

Annie Johnson Flint has written,

He giveth more grace when the burdens grow greater;
He sendeth more strength when the labours increase.
To added affliction He addeth His mercy;
To multiplied trials, His multiplied peace.

We leave the last words with James: "Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you...Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up" (vv.7-10).

A Look at Nehemiah for Today

Part 6 – Problems with the people (5:1-19)

Ted Murray

Nehemiah was concerned for the people of God. In that concern, he desired only God's best for them. Satan, on the other hand, tries to keep the people of God from God's best for them, in Nehemiah's day as he does still today. See how Nehemiah faces up to the enemy within.

Having dealt with the problems from outside the city, Nehemiah now has to face the strife within. As we look at this chapter, we see how much damage and, sad to say, animosity is caused by the enemy when strife between believers takes place. Many of us have experienced something of this during these past painful years. The Jews of Nehemiah's time were fully occupied with the dangers from without, but they had neglected their moral condition within. It is sometimes the case that those who are extremely zealous contenders for the truth, seeing so-called evil on every hand, have neglected the need for self-judgment in their own lives. James writes, "Where there is envy and strife, confusion and evil works follow" (3:16).

The apostle Paul was aware of this problem in the early church. He urges the Philippian believers to "let [their] conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ" (Philippians 1:27). He wrote of the need to stand fast, to be of one mind, and to strive together for the faith of the Gospel. He warns the Galatians, "But if you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another!" (Galatians 5:15). How sad it is to witness groups of believers proclaiming the need from separation from evil-doers and what they judge to be false doctrine, but careless as to their own moral state!

The opening verses of this chapter find a parallel in Acts 6, where the problem was about the neglect of widows. Here we find the problem is between 'the haves' and 'the have nots'. Many of the people and their wives had exhausted their resources for every day living in their effort to rebuild the walls. Their Jewish brethren, by contrast, had plenty. The people had to eat to live but, in order to do so, were under serious obligations to their Jewish brethren. Children had been sold into slavery; houses and lands had been mortgaged – all with no prospect whatsoever of redemption. They were in absolute bondage, completely beholden to their Jewish brethren.

There is a danger in our day, particularly in the mission field where poverty abounds, when materially wealthy foreign nationals by so-called help cause the people there to be beholden to them. Needs of our poor brethren have to be met wherever possible, but without strings attached that make them beholden to their benefactors. Both in the past and still today this failure takes place.

To see the full effect of this serious problem, just have a look at Corinth. In the Corinthian church there were both rich and poor. Believers were even taking each other to court to establish their rights (see 1 Corinthians 6:1-11). We may not see this kind of behaviour in the assemblies today, concerning temporal or material matters, but we do see the sad results of those who, wanting their own way, cause divisions in the assemblies.

Nehemiah, having seen and heard what was happening, now vents his feelings. He becomes very angry (v.6). Here were a people who had experienced God's help and blessing, but were now placing their fellow brethren under a burden which was too much to bear. They had completely forgotten about God's instructions as to how they should treat one another when times became hard (see Leviticus 25:35-38). It is sad when those who work in the preaching of the Gospel start to impose burdens on new believers, so exchanging one set of burdens for another. When we were saved, the burden of our sins was removed. How sad it is when it is replaced by the burden of legalism!

How should this situation be corrected? As we read the following verses, we see how Nehemiah goes about this task. He does not immediately berate the leaders in his anger. He takes time to think things through. When problems occur, we tend to act impulsively. Of Nehemiah we read, "After serious thought, I rebuked the nobles and rulers" (v.7). Those from whom



he had once sought counsel (2:16,17) were the very ones he had to rebuke. In that time of serious thought, Nehemiah was totally alone but, being a man of prayer, he found his resources in God! Nehemiah's rebuke is not fudged; it is in the open, before the assembled people. Their wrong doing, exacting usury, which was not in keeping with God's instructions in Leviticus 25:36, was made

known to all. So today in the church, the whole congregation has to be made aware of evil. In the past, there have been instances where wrong doings have been hushed up, either because of those who were involved or because it was thought by some to be too unseemly to bring to the light. Consequently these wrongs were never properly judged.

It is clear from what occurred in Nehemiah's day that every wrong act was made known. Nehemiah does not 'pull his punches' but neither does he continue to berate the guilty. He reminds them of their past acts and then presents their present obliga-

tion to their brethren. The guilty “were silenced and found nothing to say” (v.8). What was classed as normal in a worldly sense – the taking of usury – had become acceptable within the testimony of God. In our day, we too should examine our dealings and relationships both with our brethren and with our work colleagues and neighbours to see just how much they are governed by what is classed as being acceptable in every day life in 2006 A.D.! We, too, may well be silenced as we carefully examine our actions in the light of God’s word. The people of Nehemiah’s day had no excuse for their disobedience, and neither have we!

But God does not leave His people in limbo, as it were. Time after time in Scripture we find God acting in grace to restore His people. He is still the same today! The apostle John reminds us of what God has provided to restore our fellowship with the Lord and with His people (1 John 1:9; 2:1).

Nehemiah now says, “What you are doing is not good. Should you not walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the nations, our enemies?” (v.9). Then he contrasts their conduct with his. He uses his conduct as a leader, or shepherd, amongst the flock of God as an example and guide to others. The apostle Paul behaved in just this way. He speaks about his lifestyle, working with his own hands in order to support himself (Acts 20:34,35). He could invite the Philippian believers to follow his example (Philippians 3:17). He reminds the Thessalonian believers of the kind of man he was amongst them (1 Thessalonians 1:5,6). Today, more than ever, we need men and women who walk in meekness and godly fear, not puffed up with knowledge, not desiring to lord it over others, but being living examples for the church.

Nehemiah was motivated by love and pity for the suffering of those around him. He was so grieved that the Lord was being dishonoured that he was ready to use his own resources to help the needs of others. What a lovely picture of Christ! Christ’s attitude of humility and self-giving – “though He was rich, yet for [our] sakes He became poor, that [we] through His poverty might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9) – is seen in the actions of this man of God.

Nehemiah then appeals to the nobles and rulers to cease doing evil and learn to do well (Isaiah 1:17). As a result of their shame which he has exposed, he pleads with them to stop this usury. He expected results and the rulers confirm that they would restore what they had charged. Nehemiah, a man of great experience, does not simply take their word at face value. He calls the priests and requires an oath from them that they would fulfil their promise. He warns them of what God would do if they failed to keep their word, solemnly bringing the judgment of God before them. We can all, perhaps, readily identify occasions in our lives when, in the excitement of the moment, we say we will do something but, when we get home or in the cold reality of the next day, put it out of our minds. In Romans 14:10, Paul, writing about not too dissimilar circumstances, reminds us that we all have to answer for our words and deeds. The people of Nehemiah’s day readily responded to his pleas, saying “Amen”

and praising the Lord. In the light of our appearing at the Judgment Seat of Christ in a coming day, may we be equally ready to fulfil our word and carry out our promises! We are now given an account of Nehemiah's conduct as governor (vv.14-19). Looking at it from a human point of view, we might well feel that he is blowing his own trumpet. We have to remind ourselves that these actions are recorded for us in God's word and it is for our learning that they are there (Romans 15:4). Nehemiah had taken up the role of shepherd to the flock of Israel. The lesson for us is that the shepherds whom the Lord raises up for His people today should be examples to the flock (1 Peter 5:1-3).

As we look at these few verses, we see the generosity of Nehemiah. Rather than take from the people bread, wine and taxes, as he was entitled to do as governor, he provided for himself. He had identified himself with the people in the work of rebuilding the wall, not taking advantage of the poor and buying up land for himself. He made sure that all who were under his authority assisted in the work of rebuilding. In addition to all this, he was "given to hospitality" (1 Timothy 3:2). By his example, Nehemiah challenges us today. There is work for each one of us to do in rebuilding the testimony of God. We ought to esteem our brethren better than ourselves, not taking advantage of anyone (Philippians 2:3). We are to influence those of our households to assist in the testimony. We should give generously and be hospitable to others.

Nehemiah ends the chapter with a prayer: "Remember me, my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people" (v.19). He did not look for man's acclaim. Rather he desired God's commendation; he was looking for that "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25:21). Nehemiah was a man who desired to do God's will and to glorify God in his everyday conduct. There is a danger, today, that ambition to get on at work, or in society, or in sport, takes all our energies. Nehemiah had his priorities right. He wanted to bring glory and honour to God and to be a blessing to the people of God. What are our priorities? The words of the hymn below challenge us to have the same desire as Nehemiah and to be here for the praise and glory of God (see 1 Thessalonians 1:6).

I have one deep, supreme desire - that I may be like Jesus.

To this I fervently aspire – that I may be like Jesus.

I want my heart His throne to be, so that the watching world may see
His likeness shining forth in me – I want to be like Jesus!

Oh, perfect life of Christ, my Lord – I want to be like Jesus.

My recompense and my reward – that I may be like Jesus.

His Spirit fill my hungering soul; His power all my life control.

My deepest prayer, my highest goal – that I may be like Jesus!

Power for Christian Living

Part 4 – The power of prayer

Douglas Pettman

“O thou that hearest prayer, unto thee shall all flesh come” (Psalm 65:2). David’s many experiences in life had brought him to know God in this way. It has been said that “Prayer moves the hand that made the world”. May we be encouraged to know our God as a prayer-hearing and a prayer-answering God!

Believing is seeing

Some years ago, a mid-west community in the U.S.A. was experiencing a crippling drought after weeks of sunshine. The citizens of one town decided to come together in one of the prairie fields to pray for rain. All, apart from one little girl, came in their summer finery. She came in her raincoat. The Lord graciously answered their prayer that day and they all got soaked through – except the little girl!

What is prayer?

The dictionary defines prayer as “the act of offering reverent petitions, especially to God”. At least this gives us a start. Particularly when we think of God, every petition must be reverent because of who God is (Psalm 111:9). We cannot come into God’s presence in a flippant style, treating God as though we were just speaking to a neighbour. He is God.

How should we approach God? Should we stand, or sit, or kneel to pray? It is helpful to look at some examples from Scripture. Following the withering of the fig tree, the Lord Jesus speaks to His disciples concerning believing and praying, and says, “When ye stand praying...”

(Mark 11:25). He clearly indicates that to stand and pray is totally acceptable. Bartimaeus, sitting by the highway side when the Lord passes by, forcefully offers his “reverent petition” by crying out several times, “Jesus, Thou Son of David, have mercy on me”. Then we read, “Jesus stood still, and commanded him to be called” (Mark 10:46-52). It did not matter that he was sitting; his petition was heard and answered!

But we also have several examples of those who knelt to pray. We have, perhaps, a deeper appreciation of the value of prayer when we feel the necessity of approaching Almighty God on our knees. Daniel’s response to the infamous decree of Darius was to pray to God on his knees, at his open window, three times a day. This was in direct defiance of Darius, but in dependence upon God. We know the result: the Lord saved Daniel even in and from the lions’ den (see Daniel 6). The great King Solomon knelt at the dedication of the Temple (2 Chronicles 6:13). Stephen knelt at the time of his stoning (Acts 7:60). Peter knelt and prayed at the time of the raising of Dorcas (Acts 9:40). Paul knelt and prayed as he took his leave of the

*The real
necessity
is that
the heart
is right*

while Solomon, as we have seen, prayed in public. Scripture allows both posture and place to be as necessary to the occasion, but the real necessity is that the heart is right.

**Is all prayer automatically
heard?**

The plain answer of Scripture is 'No': "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me" (Psalm 66:18). How can a righteous God have any contact with sin? "Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity" (Habakkuk 1:13). God's very Person is affronted by sin; the only way a sinner can have contact with God is to come seeking forgiveness. So we read of the publican, who "standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner". Jesus said of him, "This man went down to his house justified". But what of the Pharisee in the same story? He "stood and prayed thus with himself..." His prayer went no higher than the roof; he did not go away justified (see Luke 18:9-14). Lastly, let us not forget 1 Corinthians 11:4,5. In

Ephesian elders (Acts 20:36). Finally, we should note that the Lord Himself knelt in Gethsemane (Luke 22:41). All these examples are of times of serious need.

The Lord encourages personal prayer, in secret (Matthew 6:6),

church, if we do not come to prayer in the right manner – a man with his head uncovered, a woman with her head covered – we bring dishonour on our head. The Lord Jesus sees; the angels see (v.10). Do we care what the Lord sees?

The power of prayer

It will be helpful to look at some examples from Scripture of the effectiveness of prayer. We will see that our God is a listening God who distinctly cares for His creatures and longs to bless them.

Abraham

Abraham was a man who had learned, and continued to learn, the mighty power of God and His faithfulness. So much did Abraham value the companionship of God that he became known as 'the friend of God' (James 2:23). In Genesis 19, Abraham was told by God's messengers that the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was so grievous that judgment must fall on them. Abraham cared very much for his nephew, Lot, and his family who lived there. So we find him pleading with God. Time after time, he petitioned God not to destroy Sodom provided there were righteous people there. God listened and answered. Finally, through his pleading, Abraham received the promise from God that if ten righteous people were found there, God would not act in judgment. What persistent, powerful, persuasive praying this was! And God

*Persistent,
powerful,
persuasive
praying*

heard and answered. What a merciful God He is! Sadly, there were not even ten righteous, and Lot, his wife and his two daughters, had to be removed by force and told to flee. Even then, Lot's wife disobeyed God and perished. God answers prayer but, in this instance as so often, He answered it in His own way.

Jonah

Although a servant and a prophet of God, Jonah took a very wilful pathway, refusing to obey God's directions. How can we criticise when we so often do the same? Jonah fled in the opposite direction to God's command, to the coast where he boarded a ship going as far as possible to the opposite end of the Mediterranean. Jonah was fully convinced that he had successfully evaded God, and even went to sleep in the storm-troubled ship. But God knew where His servant was! When the ship's crew learned that Jonah was responsible for the storm, they followed his directions and threw him overboard. The all-knowing power of God stopped this disobedient servant in his tracks and turned the godless mariners into God fearing worshippers!

But there is more. The God who cares had prepared a big fish to swallow up Jonah who found himself inside this great fish for three days and nights. Inside that fish, "Jonah prayed unto the LORD his God out of the fish's belly, and said, I cried by reason of my affliction unto the LORD, and He heard me..." (Jonah 2:1,2). How could Jonah, after all his disobedience, turn to "the LORD his God"? Yet in marvellous grace, he can say, "He heard me!" Jonah ends his prayer by say-

ing, "Salvation is of the LORD" (v.9). Yes, the power of God saved Jonah from a watery grave. Then Jonah went to speak to Nineveh, as God had first instructed him.

Do we marvel at God's patience with this man? Was there not a better servant? Jonah had let God down in a striking way. Yet this is the way with God – when a child of His cries to Him, the Lord hears! Haven't we often proved this? Even when we get to the depths of despair, He will hear us! "And this is the confidence that we have in Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He heareth us" (1 John 5:14). As children of God, let us keep praying!

Zacharias and Elizabeth

This godly couple are described as "righteous...and...blameless" (Luke 1:6). Zacharias had fulfilled a lifetime's duty as priest. We would never have known of the failure of their prayers but for this chapter. All their married lives, they had prayed that God would reward them with a child. They had lived in such a way that they could have expected the blessing of God. To have a child was a mark of God's blessing for the Jew; failure would suggest that God was not pleased. They could not understand why their prayers were apparently not heard. Now they had reached the point where, humanly speaking, it was too late. They might as well stop praying to a God who would not hear! And so Zacharias was in the Temple, nearing the end of a lifetime of service. Imagine his amazement when an angel appeared, right at the time when he was alone on duty, and said, "Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard" (v.13).

We cannot criticise Zacharias for being a little disbelieving. He might well have thought it was too late. But God had a most wonderful purpose in mind which He would carry through. Zacharias and Elizabeth were at last to have a child who would precede the coming of the Lord and bear witness to Him. What an honour! Towards the end of their lives, they realised what an honour it was to be fully within the purposes of God and their joy was tremendous. We find Zacharias praising God and prophesying and “the hand of the Lord was with him” (vv.64,67-79).

Do we sometimes wonder, particularly when we desire to live for the Lord, if our prayers are heard? Let this incident confirm to us that God hears our prayers, but He has His own way of answering them. Sometimes, in His purposes, the answer may be delayed but it may well be for our greater blessing and encouragement.

Cornelius

Cornelius, a Roman centurion, was a devout man, doing what he could in the circumstances where he was. He sensed that there was more to life than his exalted position in Caesar’s army. We read, he “feared God...and prayed to God always” (Acts 10:2). But he lacked the knowledge of God which would set his mind at rest. What could he do? The Lord saw this man and knew his desire. One day, towards evening, Cornelius had a vision of an angel coming to him. He sensed this was more than an angel and, later, told Peter what was said to him: “Cornelius, thy prayer is heard” (v.31). The Almighty God knew that here was, not an Israelite, but a Gentile who

desired His blessing. How ready is our God to bless! He will move an apostle for the sake of an individual soul needing peace. And so that day a Roman centurion was ushered into the ranks of believers in our Lord Jesus Christ and received the blessing of the indwelling Holy Spirit, as with every believer. The Lord Jesus is always ready to meet the needs of every soul seeking Him. He says, “Him that cometh to Me I will in no wise cast out” (John 6:37). Do we still doubt the power of prayer?

Peter

Following the imprisonment and execution of the apostle James, Peter was the next to be arrested. He would also be killed. The night before his execution, the believers decided to hold an all-night prayer meeting. During that night, with all the guards asleep, Peter was set free by an angel. Outside the prison, he was left to decide what to do. “Ah,” he thought, “Perhaps they are praying at Mary’s house”. So he went there and knocked. Although she recognised Peter, the servant girl did not let him in but went and told those praying that Peter had arrived. Can you believe that they said to her, “You are mad” (Acts 12:15)? They were praying for Peter’s release and, when the Lord granted it, they would not believe it! Thankfully, they eventually went to the door and let Peter in, to the astonishment of all. Be assured that prayer has power with God! How He delights to answer, in His own way, what we seek of Him! Let us not be astonished at what God can do. Let us trust Him for all we ask of Him. We have no other resource to whom we can turn. He alone is the

Resource who has all the power both to know and to do what is right and best in every circumstance.

Conclusion

We have seen that the Lord answers prayer. He delights to answer it with power. He will work with us even when we go far astray and seek our own way. He will bring us back. Perhaps we ask, how can we know the power of prayer around us today? How often do we pray in the morning for the Lord's care over us through the day? Do we ever think, in the evening, that the day has passed smoothly and without accident? Here is His power at work every day in keeping us.

We should recognise that the power of prayer is dependent upon our readiness to listen to the Lord, to depend on God, and to allow His will to operate in us. We will examine each of these in turn.

Listen to the Lord

We need to read His word and so understand His mind. There can never be any work of God which contradicts His word. We cannot pray and expect God to act contrary to His word. The word of God must be our guide; the Lord will act only in full accordance with what is written.

Depend on God

God knows best in all circumstances, even when it seems hard to us. Matthew 21:22 tells us, "And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive". Those praying for Peter's release had plainly not learned this lesson. The Lord has both the desire and the power to

bless. But we need to be careful. He will supply our needs (Matthew 6:30), but the context of this verse brings into view that which is for the glory of God.

Faith is exercised to carry through His work; we do not need faith to ask for our personal indulgencies and wants, nor can we expect Him to supply them. That does not accord with the position into which we have been brought as believers. We have been freed from sin and given a new life so that we are now fully able to live with all the characteristics of the Lord Himself. Our Lord gave up everything; He became poor for the infinite blessing of each one of us (2 Corinthians 8:9). We need to follow Him!

Allow His will to operate

We may find this far more difficult but we need to recognise that the Lord has only the best in mind for His people. We have seen this repeatedly in the examples we have considered. 1 John 5:14,15 tells us, "And this is the confidence (or, boldness) that we have in Him, that, if we ask any thing according to His will, He heareth us: and if we know that He hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of Him". What boldness and certainty there is in these verses! We can come boldly to a loving Father who listens to the cries of His children, and answers according to His will. Would we, as we depend on God, want it to be any different? His love is so great that He will never cause any child of His a needless tear.

Let us go on trusting Him, coming boldly to Him to pray and pray again, expecting Him to bless, for His own glory!

The Gospel in Job

Part 9 – God answers Job (chs.38-41)

Yannick Ford

“For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead” (Romans 1:20). God has deigned to demonstrate to Job, and so to us today, from His creation the wonder of His mighty power!

Elihu's speeches (see chs.32-37 and Part 8) form an introduction to the answer which God Himself now gives to Job. As was seen in previous chapters, Job had wanted to speak directly with God and to plead his cause. Now the moment has arrived! It is rather different to what Job had predicted! Right at the end of his speeches, Job had said, “Oh that one would hear me! behold, my desire is, that the Almighty would answer me, and that mine adversary had written a book. Surely I would take it upon my shoulder, and bind it as a crown unto me. I would declare unto him the number of my steps; as a prince would I go near unto him” (31:35-37). At that time, Job was convinced of his self-righteousness and his ability to stand before God in his own merits. Now the situation is rather different.

God starts abruptly, speaking out of the whirlwind. He asks, “Who is this that dark-eneth counsel by words without knowledge?” (38:2). Job and his friends had spent a long time arguing, but really, in God's sight, Job's arguments had been “words without knowledge”. As a result, Job had “darkened counsel” – he had confused and obscured the issues. The fact that God spoke out of a whirlwind is significant. In Scripture, a stormy wind is suggestive of judgment (Ezekiel 13:11,13). God was going to judge Job's words. God's love for Job was still the same, and God's desire was to bless Job as a result of all these circumstances. But at this moment, Job needed to learn that what he had been saying was just not right.

Some comments of C.H.Mackintosh are helpful. “God Himself begins to deal directly with the soul of His servant (chs.38-41). He appeals to His works in creation as the display of a power and wisdom which ought assuredly to make Job feel his own littleness. We do not attempt to cull passages from one of the most magnificent and sublime sections of the inspired canon. It must be read as whole. It needs no comment. The human finger could but tarnish its lustre. Its plainness is only equalled by its moral grandeur” (see ‘Job and his friends’, Bible Truth publishers, Illinois, USA).

God, as has been said, appeals to His works, and clearly shows the ongoing interest that He has in His creation. Many aspects of the natural world are brought out, and it is clear that God is no passive onlooker but He takes an active concern in all that He has made, including places where man has not set foot (38:25-27). Clearly, the force of God's answer to Job is that God is in control of the universe which He has

made, and that He can, therefore, be trusted to deal with Job as is right. Job, on the other hand, who could not begin to measure up against such a record, had no right to criticise God's dealings, much less to charge Him with lack of concern and unfairness.

There is, no doubt, a great deal of teaching that could be gained from a careful study of God's answer to Job. (Take the time to read carefully through chapters 38-41). Mindful of the advice quoted earlier, comment will be restricted to three important matters.

The extent of God's knowledge and power

God answers Job's challenge that He was unfair and unconcerned by showing Job His creative power. Job, no doubt, was made to feel his littleness when God asked questions such as "Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? declare, if thou hast understanding...Hast thou commanded the morning since thy days; and caused the day-spring to know his place?...Hast thou entered into the springs of the sea? or hast thou walked in the search of the depth?...Hast thou entered into the treasures of the snow? or hast thou seen the treasures of the hail?" (38:4,12,16,22).

Job 38:17 is particularly interesting because here God goes beyond His control of the natural world. He asks Job, "Have the gates of death been opened unto thee? or hast thou seen the doors of the shadow of death?" The knowledge of death and what comes afterwards has ever been that dark, unsolved and unwelcome mystery for many men and women throughout the ages. But God knows all about it, and we can know all about it too, if we believe God's record to us in the Bible.

These great issues of death, judgment, redemption and resurrection are clearly prefigured in the book of Job. With the revelation of the New Testament, we can understand the hints and figures given in the book of Job, for our profit and blessing. We can be totally clear and assured about the issues of death and what follows afterwards through the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus went into death for us – the gates of death were opened unto Him, to use the words of Job 38:17 – but He came out victorious, so we can say that the gates were opened to Him again, as He came out of death. We, too, can follow Him if we trust in Him, and thus be clear of death and its penalty of judgment.

The character of God

In ch.40, God again challenges Job as to his earlier comments: "Then answered the LORD unto Job out of the whirlwind, and said, Gird up thy loins now like a man: I will demand of thee, and declare thou unto me. Wilt thou also disannul my judgment? wilt thou condemn me, that thou mayest be righteous? Hast thou an arm like God? or canst thou thunder with a voice like him? Deck thyself now with majesty and excellency; and array thyself with glory and beauty. Cast abroad the rage of thy wrath:

and behold every one that is proud, and abase him. Look on every one that is proud, and bring him low; and tread down the wicked in their place. Hide them in the dust together; and bind their faces in secret. Then will I also confess unto thee that thine own right hand can save thee" (40:6-14).

God was taking issue with Job's argument that he was righteous, and that God was being unfair in the way that he was dealing with Job. But God teaches Job about His dealings with men – He has glory and majesty, and He brings down the proud and the wicked. "Can you do the same?" asks God. "Do you also deal with the proud and wicked?" In this way, God demonstrates that He is not only the Creator of the universe, but also the moral Governor. In both cases, therefore, He has the ability and the right to act, and Job should not have questioned this.

Behemoth and leviathan

In Job 40:15-41:34, we read of two mysterious creatures, behemoth and leviathan. Various ideas have been put forward as to what these might be. The description of the behemoth sounds rather like a dinosaur, but we have no further clues since this animal is only mentioned here in the Bible. Leviathan sounds more like a dragon. It is mentioned in three passages of Scripture. "For God is my King of old, working salvation in the midst of the earth. Thou didst divide the sea by thy strength: thou brakest the heads of the dragons in the waters. Thou brakest the heads of leviathan in pieces, and gavest him to be meat to the people inhabiting the wilderness" (Psalm 74:12-14). "O LORD, how manifold are thy works! in wisdom hast thou made them all: the earth is full of thy riches. So is this great and wide sea, wherein are things creeping innumerable, both small and great beasts. There go the ships: there is that leviathan, whom thou hast made to play therein" (Psalm 104:24-26). "In that day the LORD with his sore and great and strong sword shall punish leviathan the piercing serpent, even leviathan that crooked serpent; and he shall slay the dragon that is in the sea" (Isaiah 27:1).

This description of leviathan (which takes up the whole of ch.41) is not simply a description of what appears to be a sea-dragon; it also has a spiritual and moral significance. Isaiah 27:1 speaks of God *punishing* leviathan. This suggests that leviathan, the *crooked serpent*, is symbolical of *someone* who is to be punished. The figures of a serpent and a dragon are often used in Scripture to represent Satan. He is clearly described in this way in the book of Revelation: "And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him...And he laid hold on the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan, and bound him a thousand years" (12:9; 20:2). This description of leviathan in Job 41 also teaches us about Satan. A great many things could be brought out from this description. We will consider his pride and his power.

Satan's pride

"He beholdeth all high things: he is a king over all the children of pride" (v.34). Pride is particularly connected with Satan: "Not a novice, lest being lifted up with *pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil*" (1 Timothy 3:6). Ezekiel 28, also a symbolic passage about the devil, speaks about the King of Tyre: "Thine heart was lifted up because of thy beauty, thou hast corrupted thy wisdom by reason of thy brightness: I will cast thee to the ground, I will lay thee before kings, that they may behold thee" (v.17). Here also we have an indication that it was pride that led to the initial downfall of the devil. The devil now deceives us with pride – it is pride that leads us to think

that we are good enough for God, that our good deeds will suffice for Him, rather than accepting what God says, namely, that we are sinners who deserve judgment, but that free and full forgiveness is available in the Lord Jesus Christ.

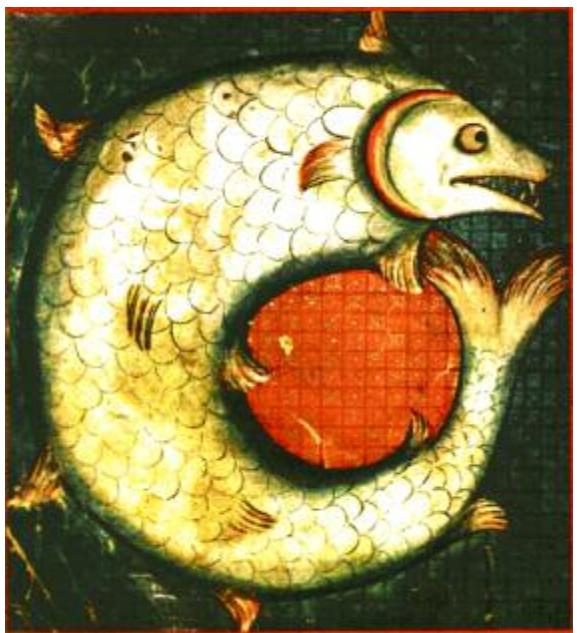


Illustration of leviathan from the Hebrew manuscript the Golden Haggadah

through fear of death. They also tell us of the Lord Jesus Christ, who came to destroy the power of the devil and deliver us. Some aspects of this battle are foreshadowed in this description of leviathan: "Lay thine hand upon him, remember the battle, do no more. Behold, the hope of him is in vain: shall not one be cast down even at the sight of him? None is so fierce that dare stir him up: who then is able to stand before me?" We have here the description of a formidable and terrifying enemy: "Shall not one be cast down even at the sight of him?" Who indeed will dare to fight with this enemy of humankind, who desires and seeks to drag as many as possible with himself into eternal condemnation?

Satan's power

The devil may deceive us, but he also seeks to terrify us. So we are told that the Lord Jesus became a man so "that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage" (Hebrews 2:14,15). These verses portray the devil as one who keeps men and women in bondage

By keeping men and women in ignorance of what the Lord Jesus has done, by keeping them in bondage to superstition, false religions, and a host of other things that men and women will do *through fear of death*, in the hope that they will be all right, the devil keeps his tight grip. Not for nothing is he called “the god of this world” who has “blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them” (2 Corinthians 4:4). The devil does not want to lose his prey, and will do whatever is necessary to keep men and women from believing the glorious good news that Jesus Christ has accomplished a full and free redemption for all.

Who then will fight against this leviathan? The Lord Jesus has won the battle against our formidable enemy! The devil might well be the “strong man” who keeps a tight hold of his goods, but the Lord Jesus is the “stronger than he” who came upon him, overcame him, and “taketh from him all his armour wherein he trusted, and divideth his spoils” (see Luke 11:21,22). We have another picture of the devil in the well-known story of David and Goliath (see 1 Samuel 17). Goliath, like leviathan, was a terrifying enemy whom no one dared to attack. But David, who is a picture of the Lord Jesus, “ran...to meet [him]” (v.48), and defeated him.

The Lord Jesus defeated Satan on the cross. In doing so, He had to lay down His life in that battle. But because He paid the penalty for our sins, and was raised again by the Father, we can be free. No longer do we need to be in “fear of death” – there is no fear for those who benefit from the Lord’s victory. 1 Corinthians 15:56 tells us, “The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law”. The devil knows that we have sinned, and seeks to keep us in bondage – what will come after death? Thus many are caught up in seeking to do good works, following empty religions, or trying to drown their conscience and fears in business, pleasure and other distractions. And so the devil keeps his prey.

But he has been defeated! So 1 Corinthians 15:57 continues, “But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ”! The devil, who is “the accuser of the brethren” (see Revelation 12:10) may well seek to terrify us by bringing our sins to remembrance, but if we have believed on the Lord Jesus and received His forgiveness, then we have been justified and have nothing to fear. So we can, with the apostle Paul, triumphantly exclaim, “Who shall lay anything to the charge of God’s elect? It is God that justifieth. Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us” (Romans 8:33,34).

It is significant that God ends His speech to Job by speaking of the terrible dragon leviathan and the battle against him. The work of the Lord Jesus on the cross, by which He defeated the devil and the power of death so that we sinners might be forgiven, justified and glorified with Him – this surely is the most marvellous and praiseworthy of all the works of God!

Keep Yourselves From Idols

Donald Hill

“No other gods before Me” (Exodus 20:3). These solemn words from Sinai still challenge us today as to who or what fills our hearts.

The call of God to leave a world characterised by idolatry to follow Him has a prominent place in Scripture. It begins with Abram and includes Gideon, the boy Samuel, fishermen from Galilee, a tax collector, Saul of Tarsus and many others. Christians today have also heard that call and responded, in greater or lesser measure.

The call of Abram

“Now the LORD had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house, unto a land that I will shew thee” (Genesis 12:1). God’s call to Abram was to separate from country, nation and family in order to possess a new country and receive wonderful blessings. Abram obeyed that call and we find him with a tent – he was a pilgrim – and an altar – he was a worshipper (v.8). It was Joshua who, many years later, just before he died, highlights the character of that call: “Your fathers dwelt on the other side of the flood in old time, even Terah, the father of Abram...and *they served other gods*” (Joshua 24:2). Idolatry was a feature of Ur of the Chaldees (close by Babylon). It also characterised Egypt, where the nation of Israel would be enslaved, and the nations which Israel were subsequently instructed to drive out of Canaan.

Joshua’s appeal was for his fellow countrymen to separate themselves from idolatry and to commit themselves to the service of the true God. He emphasised his personal commitment, and also that of his family: “But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD” (v.15).

Redemption from Egypt

In the book of Exodus, we see how the nation of Israel, the descendants of Abraham, was redeemed from Egypt by blood and by power. They were separated from the gods of Egypt. Then, in the wilderness, they were instructed as to the Tabernacle, where God’s presence was to be known amongst His redeemed people. And so, to begin with, Israel served God. God’s first words to them from Sinai were, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image...thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them” (Exodus 20:3-5). Sadly, that commandment was being broken by the nation even as God was giving it to Moses (see Exodus 32).

The call to Gideon

Joshua died, as did the generations who had seen the power of God in the conquest of Canaan. The nation then slipped back into idolatry as is seen in the book of Judges. Previously, the twelve tribes had been ordered by God to drive out the nations which

occupied Canaan. Their failure to do so meant that those nations, with their idols, remained as thorns in the side of Israel. Very soon, we find Israel serving the Baals and the Ashteroths. This invoked the anger of God. Seven nations are used by God to punish Israel but God, in His goodness, raised up deliverers like Gideon, Barak, Samson and others. Following his call by God, Gideon proves the reality of the God who had called him and raises up an altar to the true God (see Judges 6). He then pulls down his father's altar to Baal and raises up an altar on the same spot to the God of Israel. Thus there was recovery in the days of Gideon. Sadly, on his death, idolatry once again marked the nation of Israel.

Subsequent history of Israel

Failure marked Israel during the priesthood of Eli and his two sons, Hophni and Phinehas (see 1 Samuel 2), and the child, Samuel, is called. Recovery took place under Samuel and subsequently under David and Solomon, who was responsible for the building of the Temple. However, Solomon failed grievously in his old age when he associated with the heathen and served their gods (see 1 Kings 11).

The nation of Israel divided on the death of Solomon, Jeroboam ruling over the ten northern tribes, whilst Rehoboam ruled over Judah, which included Benjamin. In both kingdoms, there were kings who remained true to God but others who led the people into idolatry, thus incurring God's displeasure. Ahab and Jezebel are a well-known example of the nation's failure: "Ahab...served Baal, and worshipped him...and Ahab did more to provoke the LORD God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel that were before him" (1 Kings 16:30-33).

At this point, Elijah appears on the scene and the nation is punished by drought and famine. God is ever true to His word. Meanwhile, Elijah is sustained, first of all by the brook and, later on, by the widow. God cares for His own. The contest on Mount Carmel follows (see 1 Kings 18). "The God that answereth by fire, let him be God" (v.24). There was no response, nor could there be, when the prophets of Baal called upon him to send down fire from heaven. But when Elijah called upon his God, fire from God consumed the burnt sacrifice, the wood, the stones, the dust – and also licked up the water which had been poured into the surrounding trench. The true God, the loving God declared Himself and the witnessing crowd acknowledged this. Note that in the altar which Elijah raised up there were twelve stones – one for each of the twelve tribes of Israel. The whole nation was represented there in the altar, which was built to the name of the LORD. God is always ready to encourage recovery and if, like Elijah, we are true to God, this should mark us in our day.

The later history of Israel is well known. Because of their idolatry, God allowed the northern tribes to be taken into captivity by the Assyrians. Later on, Judah was carried away into Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar and his invading army. The city walls were broken and the Temple was destroyed. So the testimony to the true God vanished from the land.

For 70 years, Judah remained in captivity in Babylon where the exploits of Daniel and his three companions are well known. Here were young men who would not bow down to idolatry but who were prepared to take a stand for God, whatever the cost. They were miraculously preserved both in the fiery furnace and in the lions' den.

After the 70 years of captivity, it was determined by God that a remnant should return to the land. This took place under the leadership of men like Ezra, Nehemiah and Haggai when the city walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt and the Temple also. In the purposes of God, there must be those in the land in readiness for the advent of His Son – the Messiah, the Saviour of the world. God's plans and purposes are never thwarted! Satan may try to thwart them, but God is still on His throne!

There follows the birth of the Lord Jesus, His sacrificial death at Calvary, the glory of His resurrection and His ascension to God's right hand in glory. Before His departure out of this world, the Lord Jesus commissioned His followers, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15). All nations were to hear this good news (Matthew 28:19).

Jews in Jerusalem heard the message preached by Peter, while Philip preached in Samaria (see Acts 8). Later on, following his conversion on the Damascus road, Paul, along with others, took the Gospel message to the Gentile world. The keys of the kingdom had been given to Peter (Matthew 16:19), who opened the door of faith to the Jews first and then, as instructed by the Lord, to the Gentiles in the house of Cornelius (see Acts 10). The building of the church went on apace, for the Lord had promised, "The gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). All the forces which the enemy might muster down through the centuries will not defeat God's purposes concerning the church. Heaven will be filled with a praising, redeemed company, a companion for the Lord Jesus for all eternity – His church, His bride.

Idolatry in the New Testament

But the good news went out, and triumphed, in a world still characterised by idolatry. Paul and his fellow workers repeatedly met up with idols in the Roman world. After Paul had healed a crippled man in Lystra, the people said, "The gods are come down to us in the likeness of men. And they called Barnabas, Jupiter, and Paul, Mercurius, because he was the chief speaker" (Acts 14:11,12). The priest of Jupiter and the people would have done sacrifice to them. Such was the state of the heathen world into which these servants of God brought the Gospel and suffered in so doing.

When Paul arrived in Athens, his spirit was stirred in him when he saw the city, the intellectual capital of the world at that time, full of idols (see Acts 17). Speaking to the Athenians in the court of the Areopagites (Mars Hill) and having seen an inscription in the city "To the unknown god", Paul publicly gave a faithful presentation of the true God, the Creator and Sustainer of life. He urged repentance and spoke of a

coming day of judgment. His preaching was mocked but there were those who believed.

When Paul preached at Ephesus (see Acts 19) and many believed and turned to Christ, Demetrius, a silversmith who made shrines for the goddess, Diana, accused Paul of depriving him and his fellow workers of their livelihood. An uproar followed and, for two hours, the crowd chanted, “Great is Diana of the Ephesians”. Such was the grip that idolatry held there.

With what joy Paul must have written to the young converts at Thessalonica. He had spent only a limited time in the city, preaching in the synagogue on three Sabbath days. Nevertheless, there was a mighty work of the Holy Spirit in many hearts (see Acts 17), as a result of which they were delivered from idolatry. Writing to them subsequently from Athens, Paul vividly recalled the power of the Gospel at that time (see 1 Thessalonians 1). He makes four important points.

“Ye turned to God from idols” (v.9). They were surrounded by heathen temples and idols, which were visible and tangible, and by priests who would be audible. Their “work of faith” (v.3), however, had linked them with the invisible God who had been revealed in His Son, Jesus. Having completed His work on earth, the Lord Jesus had returned to heaven and was now hidden from view.

“To serve the living and true God” (v.9). Prior to their conversion, the Thessalonians had served idol gods in heathen temples. Now they served the living and true God. No doubt, this was their “labour of love” (v.3).

“To wait for his Son from heaven” (v.10). They had in view the spending of an eternal day in the company of the Lord Jesus, together with all the redeemed, in the Father’s house. In glorified bodies, they would be free from sin, pain, sorrow and death. This was their “patience of hope” (v.3).

“Delivered us from the wrath to come” (v.10). The wrath of a holy God against sin was borne by the Lord Jesus at Calvary. For the Thessalonian believers, judgment was past and eternal joy lay ahead of them.

Idolatry today

“Little children, keep yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:2). These are the closing words of John’s first epistle. They suggest that effort is needed on the part of every believer. Satan knows our weaknesses and tempts us with those things which would hinder our Christian growth and service for the Lord. “The lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life” (1 John 2:16) were present in John’s day. They had been present from the Garden of Eden (see Genesis 3) and they are still with us today!

Every believer can be an overcomer and committed to the Lord’s interests and service. Idols made with the hands of men were much in evidence in the ancient world and in the Roman world of Paul’s day. They are still to be found in many parts of the world today. The idols of our western world can be seen in materialism, in sport and sporting idols, in theatre, cinema and television with their pop idols. But we must also bear

in mind that, so far as God is concerned, an idol is anything which takes the place in our lives that rightly belongs to Him. That must give us cause for serious thought! Even relatively harmless things have the capacity to become the all engrossing passions in our lives!

The world to come

But Satan, the deceiver, will not always be allowed to continue his work of enslaving men and women in idolatry, of whatever kind. He will make one last effort in the end times: “The man of sin [will] be revealed, the son of perdition; who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God...whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming” (2 Thessalonians 2:3-10).

The end for deceivers is certain. The beast and the false prophet will be cast alive into the lake of fire burning with brimstone (Revelation 19:20). Then finally the devil himself, the deceiver, will be cast into that same lake of fire (Revelation 20:10). But for believers on the Lord Jesus Christ, the day of service, testimony, trials and difficulties will be over to be exchanged for a day of eternal joy!

“Where deceiver ne’er can enter,
Sin soiled feet have never trod,
Free our peaceful feet may venture
In the paradise of God.”

Lessons for us today

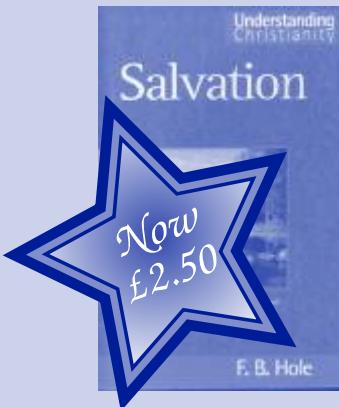
1. The call of God is to a relationship with Himself, to the worship of the only true God and to His service. We are brought into infinite blessing.
2. Abram was called as an individual out from Babylon and its idolatrous associations. Israel as a nation was redeemed by power and by blood and called out of Egypt and its idolatry: “Out of Egypt have I called my son” (Matthew 2:15). Abram had his tent – he was a pilgrim – and also his altar – he was a worshipper. Israel had the Tabernacle in the wilderness and the Temple in the land so that they might have a relationship with God and worship Him.
3. Failure to drive out the nations from Canaan, the land given to Israel by God, resulted in Israel’s failure when they were attracted to the heathen gods worshipped by those nations. The Christian’s armour (see Ephesians 6) is to enable us to stand against the wiles of the devil.
4. Today, God is looking for men and women who have the calibre of Joshua and Elijah, both of whom took a firm stand for God in their day.
5. Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai and others would remind us that our God is a God of recovery. Judah had spent 70 years in captivity in Babylon because of the sin of idolatry but there those who returned to Jerusalem to rebuild. Are we committed to recovery and rebuilding?

6. Today we are surrounded by the idols of a materialistic and affluent society. Additionally, we are surrounded by false religions with their gods. Like Gideon we can disassociate ourselves from that which is false and that which appeals to the flesh and so remain true to God.
7. Older believers need especially to beware of idols in their advanced years. Solomon started well but failed in his latter years.

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A calm and heavenly frame,
A light to shine upon the road
That leads me to the Lamb!

Where is the blessedness I knew
When first I saw the Lord?
Where is the soul-refreshing view
Of Jesus and His Word?

What peaceful hours I once enjoyed!
How sweet their memory still!
But they have left an aching void
The world can never fill.

The dearest idol I have known,
Whate'er that idol be,
Help me to tear it from Thy throne,
And worship only Thee.

So shall my walk be close with God,
Calm and serene my frame:
So purer light shall mark the road
That leads me to the Lamb.

W. Cowper

“What have I to do any more with idols?” (Hosea 14:8)