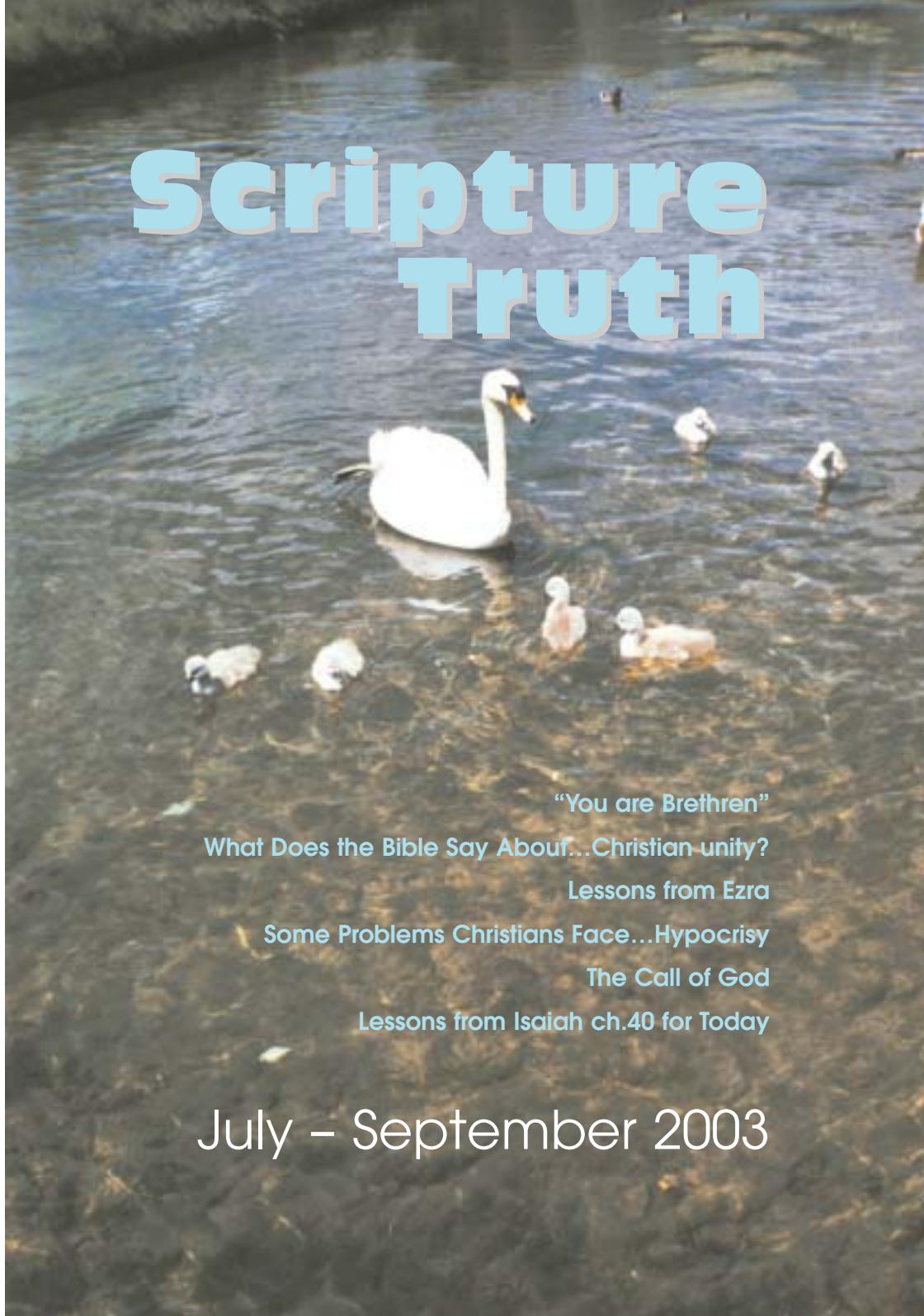


# Scripture Truth



“You are Brethren”

What Does the Bible Say About...Christian unity?

Lessons from Ezra

Some Problems Christians Face...Hypocrisy

The Call of God

Lessons from Isaiah ch.40 for Today

July – September 2003

# SCRIPTURE TRUTH

Editor: Gordon Hughes

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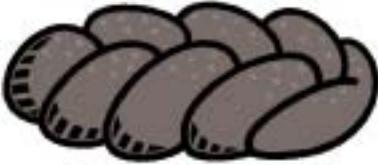
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# “You Are Brethren”

Jim Wolf

*“...that He might present it to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing...” (Ephesians 5:27) is Christ’s ultimate purpose for His Church. This must be kept in mind as we take to heart the serious issues raised in this article.*



## The blessing of unity

“Sirs, you are brethren,” are the telling words of Moses to two of his Israelite brethren as they fought together and “he...would have set them at one again” (Acts 7:26). His further words, “Why do you want to hurt each other?” (NIV), still challenge us today. In similar vein, Joseph would say to his brothers, “See that ye fall not out by the way” (Genesis 45:24). Years later, Paul would remind the Christians at Galatia that “strifes... disputes, schools of opinion” are the works of the flesh (Galatians 5:19,20, JND trans.). Has anything changed today? The flesh is ever with us and is prone to show itself in these and other ways. The accuser of the brethren (Revelation 12:10) is always ready to exploit our weaknesses.

By contrast, Psalm 133 sets out the beautiful ideal for the behaviour of believers. These three short verses begin, “Behold, how *good* and how *pleasant* it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!” That unity is likened to three things – the precious ointment, the dew of Hermon, and the blessing. The first two remind us of

the work of the Holy Spirit. The ointment gives a lasting fragrance to everything it touches; the dew gives freshness from heaven. What a wonderful combination – fragrance and freshness! These are associated with brethren dwelling together in unity, behaviour which surely demonstrates the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22,23). Significantly, there is an addition: “There the LORD commanded the blessing, even life for evermore” (v.3).

We are exhorted to use “diligence to keep the unity of the Spirit in the uniting bond of peace.” This is only possible as we “walk worthy of the calling wherewith [we] have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love” (Ephesians 4:1-3, JND trans.).

Brethren! This delightfully all-encompassing name was given by the Lord to His own after He had risen from the dead (John 20:17). Why should we wish to add further definition to that name which, after all, defines our relationship and

*Bearing with  
one another  
in love*

character? Yet even among those who became known simply as brethren all sorts of defining additions were soon apparent to sub-divide the Lord’s people. Have we lost sight of the wonderful fact that we are no longer our own (1 Corinthians 6:19,20)? We do not belong to a club, or an organisation, but we are the Lord’s brethren! God has established His unity – “One body, and one Spirit...one hope... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all” (Ephesians 4:4-6). What an emphasis on unity!

The Lord had a special commendation for the Christians at Philadelphia (Revelation 3:7-13). In part, that may have been due to the fact that they were true to their name - Philadelphia means ‘brotherly love’. That brotherly love, that concern for one another, is surely a true mark of what the Lord meant His Church, His body, to be. It is foreshadowed in the one loaf when the Lord instituted His supper (Matthew 26:26), that commemoration of His death in which He is afforded the chief place on the first day of the week.

Failure there has been in every age. Paul made clear to the Galatians that “if ye bite and devour one another, see that ye are not consumed one of another” (Galatians 5:15). The Lord’s Supper, which would remind us that we are one bread and one body is the very place where we have dis-owned one another and refused to acknowledge the bonds that He Himself has formed.



## The remedy for unity

Perhaps the remedy for the present state of things lies in the recognition of what Paul insists upon in his first epistle to the Corinthians. With this in mind, it will be useful to look at some of those important truths on which Paul insists.

- (1). Chapter 1:9: “God is faithful, by whom ye have been called into the fellowship of His Son Jesus Christ our Lord”. Notice here that (a) we are called *into* the fellowship (b) we do not form or make a fellowship (c) it is the only fellowship God recognises (d) we have to acknowledge it, be true to it, and above all else *be sure that we do not mar it!*
- (2). Chapter 1:17-31: The cross leaves nothing for us in which to glory. Where this is fully owned, the glory of God and His presence fills the house.
- (3). Chapter 2: The things not seen or heard are revealed to us as the Spirit teaches us to love God. As a result of this, we will be conscious of our own weakness; we will be unconcerned with personalities (Paul, Apollos etc.); and we will possess discernment in spiritual things. The chapter finishes on a wonderful statement: “We have the mind of Christ”! Oh, that we might demonstrate that more in our fellowship one with another!
- (4). Chapters 10,11: Here we find the fellowship of *the Lord’s Table* – not sections of believers or lists of meetings, not gatherings with particular views. It is simply *Christianity itself*. The communion spoken of here is distinctly and only connected with the

one sacrifice of Christ Himself. As believers, we have a common share in a common blessing; it is the communion of the blood of Christ and the body of Christ. That is common to all believers. The introduction of human arrangements has altered that which is so delightfully simple: “This do for a remembrance of Me”. In partaking of the Supper, we announce the Lord’s death until He comes. We also express our allegiance to Him in direct contrast to the betrayal with which the Supper was introduced.

*Unity  
even in  
diversity*

- (5). Chapter 12: It is important to remember that “there are distinctions of gifts but the same Spirit; and there are distinctions of services and the same Lord; and there are distinctions of operations, but the same God who operates all things in all” (vv.4-6). Much trouble and contention, perhaps even division, might have been avoided if this important scriptural principle had been taken into account. There can be diversity yet perfect unity, and unity even in diversity.
- (6). Chapters 13,14: Here we find what is perhaps the most important subject in Scripture: love. These chapters both humble us and rebuke us. How small we are when measured against their standard! But how encouraging that

Paul, through the Holy Spirit, credits us with the ability to “follow after love” (14:1). Let these words burn themselves into all our hearts!

- (7). Chapter 15: This chapter outlines the importance of the Gospel. It emphasises the importance of the Gospel to us as Christians as an assurance of faith, and the truth of the Gospel as delivered by Paul to the Corinthians from a risen and glorified Christ. Gospel effort, and the support of the Gospel, both at home and abroad, must always be dear to our hearts. The way in which these things are presented to us in this epistle takes account of the order of God’s house i.e. the doctrine, the fellowship, the ordinances, the ministry proper to it, then the Gospel. Our aim in testimony here ought to be to maintain what God has established in this world for His own glory by having respect for the order of God’s house. Departure from divine order will, sooner or later, lead to failure.



### **A lesson from the Old Testament**

Having looked at some of the paramount teaching of the New Testament on unity, it will be helpful now to look at 2 Chronicles 13. (Please read this chapter.) There are important lessons to be learned from this account of a civil war in Israel, a war among brethren!

On reading the full story, it becomes apparent that a bad situation was made worse by not taking into account God’s mind on the matter. As a consequence, Satan seized the opportunity to bring in apostasy i.e. a falling away from the truth of God. A system of worship was set up in a centre divorced from Jerusalem, using so-called priests who were not qualified to be priests because they were not of Aaron’s line.

Satan’s object is always to substitute the false for the true – he never leaves a vacuum. Where there is a giving up of the truth and God’s order of things i.e. according to Scripture, Satan will suggest something similar that is not the real thing. How does Abijah, king of Judah, meet this situation? Jeroboam cannot trace his family back to David; he is a usurper to the throne. Abijah addresses him directly: “Ought ye not to know that the LORD God of Israel gave the kingdom over Israel to David for ever, even to him and to his sons by a covenant of salt?” (v.5). So years later, Paul would remind those at Antioch in Pisidia of God’s testimony to David, “I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after mine own heart, which shall fulfil all my will” (Acts 13:22).

But then, as today, Satan would attempt to negate the purposes of God. Those purposes of God for today can be summed up as follows:

- (a) to have a Man in heaven, His own Son, and the redeemed Church, the ‘many sons’ (Hebrews 2:10), to share His glory there (Ephesians 1);
- (b) that the Church might be seen in this world as ‘the body of Christ’, ‘a habi-

tation of God through the Spirit’ (Ephesians 1:22,23; 2:19-22; 3:18-21);

- (c) to gather together in one all things in Christ, both in heaven and in earth (Ephesians 1:10). This would include the times of refreshing for Israel (Acts 3:19-21);
- (d) to save men by the preaching of the Gospel of His grace (Ephesians 1:13).

Christ is, and always will be, the centre of God’s purposes.

We can readily see that that which is committed to man and becomes his responsibility to maintain is prone to failure, yes, even to rebellion. There clearly was rebellion against the authority of the house of David and the order laid down by God. Sadly, in the professing church today there is still departure from God’s order and His desires for His church. There is departure from the beautiful simplicity of the Lord’s Supper and even denial of parts of Holy Scripture as being relevant for modern times. Rebellion indeed!



However, as in every age and every place, a faithful remnant is maintained. So believers today who desire to be faithful to the Lord and to His word can take com-

fort from His message to the church at Philadelphia: “I know thy works; behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it: for thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name” (Revelation 3:8).

Abijah’s second accusation was, “Have you not cast out the priests of the LORD?” (v.9). Not only had Jeroboam rebelled against God’s chosen kings by usurping the throne, but he had also cast away God’s spiritual order. As a result, sacrifices to strange gods were commonplace throughout Israel. In contrast, Abijah can speak of the priests in Judah who “minister unto the LORD” and also of the Levites who “wait upon their business” (v.10). Here, everything was being done in accordance with God’s order.



### Lessons for today

What are the lessons from this for us today? In the old dispensation, there were clearly two offices established for the service of God – priestly and Levitical. In the new dispensation, each believer is called upon to fulfil both of these offices. Every believer today is part of “a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:5). This is the privilege of every believer, young and old. It is not the preserve of those who have been ordained by men, who thus deny the clear teaching of Scripture. May we ever be ready to offer up our praise and worship to Him who loved us and gave Himself for us! Then we will have a deep appreciation of all that

the Father Himself found in that blessed Man, not only in His life but also in His death on the cross. The burnt offering which the priests offered speaks to us of all the personal perfections of the Lord and His moral grace, rising up as a sweet savour to the Father.

The Levites about their business would remind us that they were given to the service of Aaron, then to Aaron and his sons (Numbers 3:6,9). So our direction to service should be first to the Lord (Aaron being a type, or picture, of the Lord), then to others. The service of the Levite was more to the outside than the inside. Similarly, we need to be looking to the testimony, that which is seen by others, and to the work of the Gospel going out to those who are outside, those who are lost.

May these two forms of service never be neglected. Let us first *look up* and worship the Father in spirit and in truth (John 4:23), then *look abroad* at the fields ready for harvest (John 4:35). Both forms of service need to go hand in hand.



# What Does the Bible Say About...?

## 5. Christian unity

John Keable

*“May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me” was Jesus’ prayer to His Father just before the cross (John 17:21) for His disciples and for us who would follow them. Even then, He would have been aware of the sad testimony of the Christian church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Yet still He prayed!*

“How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity” (Psalm 133:1). Wouldn’t it be wonderful if all those who truly know and love the Lord Jesus Christ were united in mind and purpose? Somewhere along the line of Christian history, things have gone wrong. You do not have to look very far in the Christian church to see that Christians are anything but united. We have different opinions on many subjects. Some differences are acceptable; others tear us apart. On the one hand, are there occasions when we cannot continue in unity with another group of Christians? On the other hand, are all differences of opinion to be tolerated? It will be helpful to look at what the Bible has to say about Christian unity.

### All one in Christ Jesus

The first point to make is that, as far as God is concerned, there is only one Christian Church. It is made up of all those who, over the centuries, have truly asked the Lord Jesus Christ into their hearts and lives, those who know that their sins are forgiven and that they now live a new life in Him. “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for



All one  
in  
Christ Jesus

all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:26-28).

The love of God transcends all racial barriers; it knows no class distinction. Even sexual gender makes no difference when it comes to obtaining salvation. “Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all” (Colossians 3:11).

As Christians, our focus is Christ Himself – and no one else! When we lose our focus, we lose sight on God’s perspective on things. Every true believer in Jesus Christ is welcomed by God into His family, regardless of who they are, where they came from, or what lifestyle they led up to the point of meeting Jesus. “To those who believed in his name, he gave the

right to become children of God” (John 1:12). This means that God is your Father – but it also means that every true Christian is your brother or sister!

### **The Body of Christ**

When the Lord Jesus lived on earth, He had a human body. He now lives in heaven with that same body, but the Holy Spirit is here on earth dwelling in every believer in Christ. In this way, the Christian Church is called the Body of Christ – it is His hands, His feet, His voice. In short, the Church is Christ’s representative on planet earth.

“The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptised by one Spirit into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink” (1 Corinthians 12:12,13). In the body of Christ, there is a place and a function for every believer in Christ. If one part of our body does not function properly, it affects the function of the whole body. It is the same in the Christian Church. If one member, however small and insignificant he or she may feel, does not function as God intended, the whole body suffers! It is a scary thought!

“In Christ, we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others” (Romans 12:5). The passage in Romans 12 goes on to explain that we all have different gifts for use in the Church and we are urged to make sure those gifts are used for the glory of God.

“...Is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are

one body, for we all partake of the one loaf” (1 Corinthians 10:16-17). We display our unity in the Body of Christ when we break bread, or take communion as it is sometimes called. The bread and wine is a picture of the Lord’s body and blood given for us on the cross. However, the fact that we share one loaf with those with whom we meet also displays our recognition of each other as part of the Body of Christ on earth.

### **A call to unity**

It is a sad fact that the Church of Christ is not united in a practical way. Since the time of the Acts, there have been problems in the Church. There have been those who have strived for unity at all costs, and there have been those who seek to cause division over the smallest detail. As we shall see, neither of these lines is according to God’s word.

“Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). Unity with other believers in Christ should be our goal. We should be looking for reasons to be united with our brothers and sisters in Christ – not looking for reasons to divide. If you read Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, you get an idea of how seriously Paul regarded division. Now, bear in mind that in the church at Corinth there were those who were living immoral lives (this matter is dealt with by Paul later in his epistle), there were those who were unruly, there were those who denied the fact of Christ’s resurrection. But take note of the very first thing for which Paul criticises them – division within the church! (See 1 Corinthians 1:10-13).

“I appeal to you brothers, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you be perfectly united in mind and thought” (1 Corinthians 1:10). This verse may sound like a pretty tall order! Yet it is clear that Paul believed it was possible to achieve such a condition, and look at the condition of the church to whom he was writing!

“All of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble” (1 Peter 3:8). One of the biggest hindrances to unity is a lack of love – a lack of compassion and a lack of humility. But before I go around shouting about these things to others, I must take a long, hard look at my own heart! Each of us must do the same before the Lord.

One of the best incentives for unity is the fact that, just before the cross, our Lord prayed that we would be united. “That all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you...May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (John 17:21-23). Notice from the Lord’s prayer here that unity in the Church would let the world know that God sent Jesus and that God loves this world. This is a great challenge! If unity is not seen in the Church, neither is God’s love! This may well be one of the reasons for the decline of Christianity in the U.K. in recent decades.

It is also worth noting that our prayers are more effective when we are united: “I tell you that if two of you on earth agree

about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them” (Matthew 18:19,20). Although we often use the verse in Matthew 18:20 as an excuse to stay in our “twos and threes” rather than uniting with similar, but perhaps not identically like-minded Christians, the verse is actually a promise that prayer will be answered if a few are united in their request.

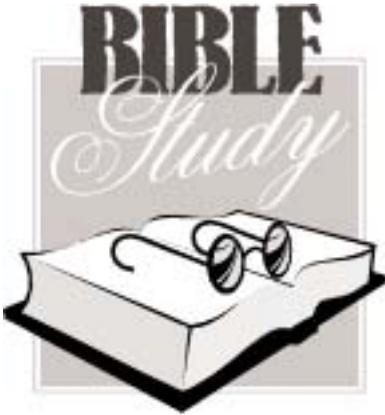


### Separation from evil – when unity is broken

There are only a few occasions in the New Testament where the breaking of unity is commanded. The first is in 1 Corinthians 5 and concerns a person in the Christian fellowship who is known to be living an immoral life. Paul commands that this one is to be excluded from the fellowship. Now let us be clear about this, exclusion from fellowship here does not simply mean that the person no longer breaks bread with us; it means that we have nothing whatever to do with him until he repents of his sinful ways.

*If unity  
is not seen in  
the Church,  
neither is  
God's love!*

1 Corinthians 5:11 lists those who claim to be Christians with whom we can have no fellowship: immoral, greedy, idolater, slanderer, drunkard, swindler. Of these, Paul writes, "With such a man do not even eat". Serious words! The only contact we can have with those excluded from fellowship is in order to seek their repentance and restoration to the fellowship.



"In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us" (2 Thessalonians 3:6). A Christian who deliberately goes against the word of God is a very dangerous person. Such people, who make the Bible fit their own ideas rather than allowing belief to be moulded by the Bible and the Holy Spirit, have led many Christians astray. For this reason, Paul is very clear that any person who refuses to obey God's word should be avoided.

John similarly warns against those who teach false doctrine: "Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teach-

ing of Christ...do not take him into your house or welcome him" (2 John 9,10).

It is important to notice that, in Scripture, the object of exclusion is always that the person in question should repent and be restored to fellowship. In 2 Corinthians 2:5-11, Paul instructs the church at Corinth to restore the man to fellowship. It is clear that he had repented of his sin and had changed his lifestyle. Exclusion must always be with a view to restoration. Nowhere in the New Testament is a Christian fellowship given authority to exclude another fellowship. Exclusion always involves the discipline of individuals and is the responsibility of the fellowship to which he belongs. Naturally, one who is properly excluded from one fellowship should not be welcomed in another.

### **Final thoughts and conclusion**

I understand that many of the comments made could be accused of being idealistic. The world and the Church have changed considerably since the apostles' time. However, the word of God is still as relevant today as it was when it was written. We may not be able to get back to a position of perfect unity in the Church of God. We may never see the Body of Christ as a whole unit until we get to glory. But each of us should surely be upon our knees and examining our hearts, looking for ways in which we, in our assemblies and fellowships, can show to the world outside that our God is a God of love and that we are His people.

# Lessons From Ezra

## Part 5: Ezra's companions (ch.8)

Ted Murray

*Names given in Bible times often had deep spiritual significance. This article draws some interesting lessons for us today from the names of those Israelites who dared to go back to Jerusalem, God's centre, with Ezra.*

Like ch.2, ch.8 consists of a list of names. Less numerous than ch.2, this list consists only of 1,700 people. The people listed here, like those in ch.2, share the same desire to be at God's centre, Jerusalem. In ch.7, we saw how King Artaxerxes was favourably disposed towards the Jews and Ezra in particular. He granted permission to all who volunteered to leave Babylon to return with Ezra to Jerusalem. Ch.8 opens with the statement, "These are the heads of their fathers' houses". In this article, we shall look at the lessons to be learned from these men and the meanings of their names.

The list of names can be divided into 5 easily recognised groups. Within each group, the names fall into sets of three, with almost all of the heads of families listed bringing with them a number of males. The characteristics of each group, as we shall see, are essential features in every assembly of the Lord's people today. It is important for the proper functioning of the local assembly that these features are seen. Otherwise, there will be disorder and an unclear testimony. The Lord has given these gifts to believers in every locality. Sadly, they may not always be seen because of discord and dissension and, at times, the dominance of some of those who take the lead in the local assembly. Each of us needs to examine

our heart and conduct as to how we display these features.

### Group 1 – priests and kings (v.2)

Here we see something of the responsibility that is ours because of the position we have been brought into by Christ. The first name is Gershom, meaning 'a stranger there', a son of Phineas. The next is Daniel, 'God is Judge', a son of Ithamar, and finally, Hattush, 'a contender', a son of David. Peter reminds us that believers are both a holy and a royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:5,9). As such, we should be characterised by those features indicated in the meanings of these names. 'A stranger there' – are we at home in the world that crucified our Lord? 'God is Judge' – do we realise that we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ and give an account of what we have done with the talents entrusted to us in His service? 'Contender' – are we contending in our daily lives for the faith delivered unto us, or have we become lukewarm? As we consider these challenges, surely these features should characterise us in view of what we are in Christ.

### Group 2 – men of influence (vv.3-14)

These verses list the achievements of these men of influence. We need to

remember that the Lord takes note of and values what we do for Him. There are five separate groups, each with their own distinguishing features, in these twelve verses. We will consider each of these in turn.



### Gospel preachers

In this first group, we find three men: Zechariah, ‘Jehovah is renowned’; Elihoenai, ‘to Jehovah are mine eyes’; Ben-Jahaziel, ‘God reveals’. As we consider the meanings of these three names (in reverse order), we have a picture of how the Holy Spirit works through the preaching of the Gospel. In grace, our situation as sinners is revealed to us; then we are instructed to look to the Lord and be saved; turning our eyes upon Jesus, we finally obtain a lasting impression of His greatness. “The things of the world will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace.”

### Helps

In the second group, we have another three men: Ebed, ‘servant’; Jeshaiiah, ‘Jehovah is my Helper’; and Zebadiah, ‘Jehovah endows’. This group typifies those people in the church today who are always able to make time to do the

unglamorous and onerous jobs which many of us tend to leave undone. We should remember that the Lord made Himself of no reputation (Philippians 2:7). When we do take on some of these jobs in the assembly, we are often amazed how the Lord gives us the needed strength and endows us with the power to see them through. These men, characterised by humility, are those we should emulate in our day. In their day, there was breakdown but also a glimmer of revival. These men (though numbering only 200) left the comfort of Babylon to endure the hardships of Jerusalem so that they might repair the breakdown and advance that revival. How we need such today! They would surely come into the category of ‘helps’ (see 1 Corinthians 12:28).

### Dedicated

The third group brings us another trio: Obadiah, ‘servant of Jehovah’; Ben Josiphiah, ‘Jehovah adds’; and another Zechariah, ‘Jehovah is renowned’. In this group, we have a picture of dedicated service leading to addition which adds renown, or glory, to the Lord. Dedication is a feature that is sometimes lacking in our service for the Lord. As a result, we no longer see spiritual growth. We read of the early church that “the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47). Where is this growth today? Have we grown accustomed to listening with a critical ear to others minister God’s word so that we make sure, like

*A glimmer  
of revival*

the Pharisees and Scribes, that the ministry is orthodox? Are we concerned only with meeting criteria that have been passed down rather than working out from Scripture by the Spirit's guidance the truth of God for ourselves today?

### Appreciative

In the fourth group there are four names mentioned: Johanan, 'Jehovah is gracious'; Eliphelet, 'God of escape'; Jeiel, 'God snatches away'; and Shemaiah, 'Jehovah is fame'. The last three are sons of Adonikam, 'my Lord has risen'. The group gives us a picture of appreciation. Each believer has an appreciation of the grace of God (Ephesians 2:8). In Ephesians 1, we are reminded that by grace we are accepted in the Beloved. Our redemption and our forgiveness is according to the riches of His grace. Every blessing that we have is from and of God. What a gracious God we have! We then realise the effect of His great salvation in delivering us from the power of Satan. As a result, we are able to express in worship the fame of our Lord who has risen from the dead.

### Faithful men

The fifth group of Ezra's companions consists only of two names: Uthai, 'Jehovah helps' and Zabud, 'well remembered'. It is interesting that Bigvai, their father (v.14), had already gone up to Jerusalem with Zerubabel (2:2). Here we have a picture of the generations of faithful men. There are those in the church today who, because of their upbringing, have come to know the Lord. Like Timothy, "from childhood [they] have known the Holy Scriptures" (2 Timothy 3:15). We can be thankful for faithful

examples in families where the different generations follow the Lord. We can also look back with thankfulness to spiritual forebears by whom the Lord has blessed us. Some of these were used to recover truths which had been lost to the church in earlier generations: coming together in simplicity to remember the Lord in the breaking of bread; taking our place as holy and royal priests before God; looking for the coming of the Lord for His Church. What a heritage we come into as we endure the hardship of, but enjoy the blessing of, moving to God's centre! "Outside the camp" is the place where we should be to "offer the sacrifice of praise to God" (Hebrews 13:10-15).

### Group 3 – men of trust (vv.15-17)

In v.15, it seems as if Ezra had a crisis on his hands. The people had camped for three days during which time it was discovered that there was a lack of the sons of Levi for the worship of God. This was a serious problem then as it is today. Too often today we suffer from silent brothers, men who are able to help but somehow manage to remain silent during the long pauses which sometimes occur when we gather in His Name to worship. The men listed in v.16 are described as "leaders" and "men of understanding". What a blessing it was for Ezra to be able to turn to them for help! Today, we still need men like these who are concerned with the welfare of the assemblies of God's people.

Their names are interesting. Firstly, we have Eliezer, 'God is help'; Ariel, 'lion of God'; Shemaiah, 'Jehovah is fame'. We are reminded of the psalmist's confi-

dence, “My help cometh from the Lord” (Psalm 121:1). In days of difficulty, it is good to remind ourselves that the Lord is our only source of help. When we realise that without Him we can do nothing, then we see something of His might and awesomeness, causing us to rejoice in Him. Acts 27:39-44 is an apt reminder of this.

Then we have Elnathan, ‘God is giver’; Nathan, ‘giver’; and Zechariah, ‘God is renowned’. Their names remind us of where our resources lie, how they are dispensed, and the resulting effect of good stewardship. God’s resources are unlimited (see Philippians 4:19; 2 Corinthians 9:8).

The final trio are Meshullam, ‘associated friend’; Joiarib, ‘Jehovah contends’; and another Elnathan, ‘God is giver’. This group would speak to us today of friendship and fellowship in the testimony, but with the reminder that we have to guard the truth and contend against the inroads of false doctrine. When there is that fellowship in truth, then God blesses (see Psalm 133). Both Paul and Jude remind us of the need to be on our guard (1 Timothy 6:20) and to contend for the faith (Jude 3).

These characteristics are very much needed amongst the people of God today. How much we need those, however few, who are able to associate themselves wholeheartedly with the presentation and maintenance of the testimony of the Lord to His praise and honour!

#### **Group 4 – the Levites (v.18-23)**

The Levites were those whose privilege it was to minister in the sanctuary. The picture painted in v.15 was black. “None of the sons of Levi” had been found among

*There’s a work  
for Jesus  
none but you  
can do*

them. Ezra, a priest, knowing well the indispensable role of the Levites, discussed the problem with his associates. Those men of trust, whom we considered in the previous section, were used by God to search out Levites, those who were able to carry out the daily duties of the temple. Today the Lord has work to do for every believer. As the hymn puts it, “There’s a work for Jesus none but you can do”. Each of us needs to examine his or her heart humbly before the Lord as to the time we spend in service for Him.

We seem to live in a day when only occasional attendance to remember the Lord is deemed sufficient. This attitude has almost destroyed the testimony and the joy of fellowship. There is, in some places, a feeling of isolation and despair amongst those who are struggling to maintain that which was once delivered unto them and enjoyed to the full. Let us take heart from this example of Ezra. All was not lost! Three more men, two of them with their families, were found willing to take their place with the Lord’s people: Sheribiah, ‘Jehovah originates’; Hashabiah, ‘Jehovah is associated’; and Jeshiah, ‘Jehovah helps’. They were accompanied by the Nethinims, ‘dedicated to serve’.

As we ponder these meanings, we can be encouraged that we have the word of God to guide us in how we approach and worship God (John 14:6). We need to let that word of Christ dwell in us richly (Colossians 3:16). On the night of His betrayal, the Lord Jesus promised that we would not be left without help – the Holy Spirit of truth (John 15:26; 16:13). The Holy Spirit will guide us in all things. In the light of all that has been given to us, let us be vessels fit for the Master’s use (2 Timothy 2:21), marked by dedication to His service in the locality where He has placed us, so that the testimony be blessed and bright. Let us pray that, in our day, the Lord will also raise up those in the local assembly who uphold the truth which has been delivered, who are guided by the Holy Spirit, and who are dedicated to the Lord to maintain the testimony and to serve His people.

### Group 5 – the treasurers (vv.24-36)

V.24 tells us that it was to Sherebiah, Hashabiah and ten of their brethren that the silver and gold were entrusted. It was all carefully weighed and recorded as it was passed over to these men who were separated to this task. Ezra reminds the group (v.28) of the position of trust and of dignity that was now theirs, “You are holy”, and the vessels entrusted to them were holy. Ezra emphasises the importance of their task with the words “Watch...keep” (v.29).

Paul similarly reminded Timothy of the special task that was his in his day (2 Timothy 1:13,14). That same challenge is ours today! How do we measure up to the tasks with which we have been entrusted?

How do we handle the Lord’s treasures? 2 Timothy 2:2 reminds us of our obligation to ensure that what has been given to us is faithfully passed on to others for future generations. Today, we need to watch out for savage wolves (Acts 20:29), for ravenous wolves and, more especially, for those in sheep’s clothing (Matthew 7:15). As those men of Ezra’s day had to guard against robbers and bandits, so we need to guard against those who would rob us of what has been entrusted to us for our safekeeping and which rightly belongs to the Lord.

This group consisted of twelve men. It was representative of all Israel, not just the remnant gathered by the river of Ahava. This should encourage us today. God still has those in the church who will carry out the task of caring for His treasure. The names of the four men mentioned at the completion of the journey are instructive: Meremoth, ‘strong, firm’; Eleazar, ‘God helps’; Jozabad, ‘Jehovah endows’; and Noadiah, ‘Jehovah assembles’. These four meanings should characterise those amongst the people of God who have been entrusted to look after the treasure, not only that of God’s word but also of the material and financial gifts of the assembly.



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In Scripture, number four can speak of testing. These four men waited until the fourth day (v.33) before handing over their charge. There was no desperate attempt to be rid of the great responsibility that they carried. Everything they did was measured. The initial charge given to them in Ahava was that the task was holy, they were holy, and the articles for which they were responsible were holy. So we need to realise that those who have responsibilities in the local gatherings are handling that which the Lord calls holy. Are we sometimes careless how we handle the financial, spiritual and welfare aspects of the local assembly?

For these four men, the daunting task, as well as the awesome responsibility, of safeguarding the treasure was now over. There was nothing lost! The weights were identical! What a relief it must have been as they handed over the silver and the gold and the vessels! All these were necessary for the furtherance of the worship of the Lord in Jerusalem. Today, also, we have many responsibilities as we look after that with which we have been entrusted – the upkeep of the fabric of the place in which we meet; the legal aspects of trusteeship; the distribution of financial help.

Now that their responsibility was discharged, it was time to rejoice. In v.35, we see that the people flocked to the altar to offer their thanksgiving with a great number of burnt offerings. The burnt offering speaks of all that was for God; neither the priest nor the offerer had any part of it. How wonderful when we realise that all our blessings come from God and then to respond by giving Him the praise and worship of which He is so worthy!

Twelve he-goats were offered as a sin offering. The returning people identified with their brethren, all Israel, as a people who had failed in their responsibility to God. We, too, should realise this as we look at Christendom today and humble ourselves because of the failure all around – not just in Christendom generally but in ourselves.

The treasurers then fulfilled their responsibility to those who were not of Israel: the king's satraps and governors – the powers that be. So we are reminded that we should pray for all in authority that we should lead "a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence" (1 Timothy 2:2).

What a scene it must have been! Joy, contrition, thankfulness and worship all blended together there. The whole company, those 1,700 souls, were finally in the court of the temple, praising and thanking God for His goodness and mercy shown to them. They were now able to sing the Lord's song in His courts. They were no longer those who wept as they longed for this moment when in the strange land (Psalm 137), but were now in a place of nearness. It may be that the vast crowd took up the Songs of degrees (Psalms 120-134) as they made their way to the temple. We, too, should take up our songs of praise for the Lord's great blessings to us as we come into His presence – not only for the blessings experienced along life's way, but those of forgiveness, redemption, justification, reconciliation. We will grow to appreciate these more as we look into the scriptures, those treasures which have been faithfully preserved and handed down to us in our day.

# Some Problems Christians Face

## 2. Hypocrisy – how can I be consistent?

*Reality or pretence? Is your Christianity real and living or is it sometimes play-acting? All of us need to let the searching words of Scripture test our hearts.*

*This article is based on a talk first given on London's Premier Radio.*

*Peter Ollerhead*

### Introduction

A Sunday School teacher used the story of the Pharisee and the publican (Luke 18:9-13) for his weekly lesson. Assembling all his teaching aids, he unfolded the story in a very dramatic fashion, completely capturing the children's attention. They learned of the poor publican's condition and the Pharisee's imagined superiority. The teacher closed the lesson by saying that they would now pray and thank God that they were not like the Pharisee! This completely ruined the whole point of the lesson.

It is so easy for each of us to imagine that our actions are beyond reproach and our motives clear of the taint of hypocrisy. One of the charges frequently levelled against Christians is that of hypocrisy. It is implied in the repeated comment, "If that is how a Christian acts, then I am glad I don't go to church". It is important, therefore, that we carefully examine ourselves as to this matter of personal hypocrisy.

### In the Old Testament

Hypocrisy is not a phenomenon of this modern age. The Lord Jesus had much to say about the subject. Going further back

in time, the Old Testament also deals with the subject as it crops up in lives of some of the characters who people its pages. The first mention of a hypocrite is in Job 8:11-14: "Can the rush grow up without mire? Can the flag grow without water? Whilst it is yet in his greenness, and not cut down, it withereth before any other herb. So are the paths of all that forget God; and the hypocrite's hope shall per-



ish: whose hope shall be cut off, and whose trust shall be as a spider's web". These verses suggest two things. Firstly, that something is fundamentally wrong

with the hypocrite's faith if the Bible compares it to a spider's web. Such a simile would tell us that, in the day of testing, such faith would have no strength; it would fail. Secondly, that before that day of testing, everything looks fresh, real and living.

These same factors are seen in other scriptures. Hypocrisy is the absence of reality in our dealings with God. We put on the trappings of Christianity, but real, living response is absent. That is not to say that the taint of hypocrisy cannot invade the lives of those who have true faith. Obviously it can and, sadly, it does.

The ministry of God's word, applied in the power of the Holy Spirit, will make us aware of our insincerity or hypocritical actions.

In Job 17:8, we see Job pitted against the hypocrite. Job's suffering was not because he was uniquely sinful or because he had done some really awful deed and was being punished for it. When his friends charge him so, he vehemently denies that he is responsible in any way. Anyone blaming Job for his suffering was a hypocrite because he would be at least as guilty of the same misdemeanours as he pinpointed as the cause of Job's suffering. The hypocrite was speaking from a prepared position without any real faith or understanding of the ways of God.

One of Job's supposed friends makes the insightful comment "...the joy of the hypocrite [is] but for a moment..." (Job 20:4-7). The hypocrite may have his day but it is very fleeting.

From these scriptures, it can be seen that at the heart of hypocrisy is deadness. It is quite pertinent that 'hypocrisy' in the A.V. is translated 'godlessness' in the NIV. There is no reality in matters relating to God. Faith is not present, only a mawkish repetition of half-truths. Instead of speaking from the stronghold of a vibrant faith in the living God, the hypocrite recites platitudes and precepts from an empty and cold heart.

It is a strange thing that Christianity, the heart of which deals with such momentous, eternal matters, can cause some Christians to assume attitudes that have no reality. One of the most common accusations made against supposed Christians is that of saying but not doing. We preach,



*We preach,  
but we  
don't practise!*

but we don't practise! This is to have the spirit of hypocrisy and we need to be brutally honest with ourselves. We need the searching, piercing glare of God's word ministered in the power of the Spirit. The first question to be honestly faced is 'Do we have a real, living faith in Christ?' Perhaps what we say and practise does not come from a living relationship with God but rather from an outward performance of Christianity. If we attend a place of worship and speak words that are not rooted in reality and faith, then we are being hypocrites.

But it is also possible to have a living faith in Christ and yet also have the spirit of hypocrisy. We can say the right words, or pretend to adopt the right attitudes, but do something entirely different. Our demeanour can suggest that we care for the poor and fatherless but, when an appeal is made for money, we spend it on a new carpet or some fancy gadget!

### **In the New Testament Play acting**

The New Testament also helps us to understand the true meaning of hypocrisy and, at the same time, warns against it. The Greek word translated 'hypocrite' in the Gospels has to do with play-acting. "[This word] primarily denotes one who answers; then, a stage actor; it was a custom for Greek and Roman actors to speak in large masks with mechanical devices



for augmenting the force of the voice; hence, the word became used metaphorically of a dissembler, a hypocrite” (W.J.Vine, *Dictionary of New Testament Words*). By the 1<sup>st</sup> century, then, the word had the connotation of one who played roles. This is in line with its meaning in the Old Testament where, as we have seen, the word was used to mean absence of reality.

Obviously, the word as originally used was not always employed in a negative sense. No one expects an actor to be the person he is depicting. When the word is used in Scripture, it retains a totally negative interpretation. We always expect that a person who puts forth a point of view that has ethical implications would also practise those same ethics. The Lord Jesus certainly thought so, as can be seen particularly in the Gospel of Matthew.

### Hypocrisy in prayer

There we see that the Lord teaches His disciples to pray by giving to them what is often inappropriately called the Lord’s prayer. Before He does so, however, He calls their attention to how not to pray: “And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward” (Matthew 6:5). He gives a

similar warning in v.16, this time about fasting.

We should note that in both these cases the hypocrite actually carries out the deed in question. The error of the hypocrite is the outward show with which it is done. One of the purposes of fasting was to indicate one’s deep contrition and repentance. For the hypocrite, it was merely an opportunity to intensify the facial evidence of fasting in order to become the object of attention. The hypocrites played to the gallery and, as the Lord said, they received their reward – the praise of men. This is further confirmed in the Lord’s words in v.2: “Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.” Here we see that the aim of the hypocrite was the recognition and plaudits of his fellow men.



We should emphasise again that the hypocrite described in these verses was not guilty of empty promises or of non-action. The hypocrite was condemned because he masked his desire for the praise of men under a cloak of spirituality. It might be claimed that the beneficiary of his giving, especially the hungry and the homeless, would not care about his attitude. They would be more concerned with the end result – the allevia-

tion of their suffering. But it is important to see that the Lord insists on purity of motives. This serves as a warning to us all because it is so easy to delude ourselves that we are serving God when, if we are honest, we are really seeking personal recognition. All our service should be motivated by our love for the Lord Jesus. Our call to discipleship should not be mixed with an opportunity to make much of ourselves!

### Speck and plank

But there is another kind of hypocrisy against which the Lord equally warns: “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye” (Matthew 7:3-5). Here, the hypocrite is not deceiving others, or seeking the praise of his fellow men. Rather he is guilty of self-deception. Again, it is easily possible to be so unfeelingly jealous of the Lord’s interests and testimony that the result is nothing but unadulterated hypocrisy.

Perhaps the best example of such hypocrisy is found in 2 Samuel 12:1-12. This is the account of Nathan’s parable to David about the rich farmer who stole the poor man’s only sheep in order to furnish his dinner table. David was livid when he heard the details, even to the point of threatening death to the rich man for his callous indifference. Then Nathan speaks the famous accusation that David himself was the guilty man! Up to that point,

David was blissfully unaware that, in taking Uriah’s wife, he, too, had acted in a manner similar to the rich man. Hypocrisy can be an insidious feature, not easily recognised or admitted by those whom it afflicts. When, however, it is brought home to our conscience, we do well if it produces humiliation of spirit along with purpose of heart to be more vigilant in ridding ourselves of such a nasty quality.

### Hypocrisy condemned

One final kind of hypocrisy is found in Matthew 22:15-22. Because of the seriousness of the subject, the verses are worth quoting in full: “Then went the Pharisees, and took counsel how they might entangle him in his talk. And they sent unto him their disciples with the Herodians, saying, Master, we know that thou art true, and teachest the way of God in truth, neither carest thou for any man: for thou regardest not the person of men. Tell us therefore, What thinkest thou? Is it lawful to give tribute unto Caesar, or not? But Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, Why tempt ye me, ye hypocrites? Shew me the tribute money. And they brought unto him a penny. And he saith unto them, Whose is this image and superscription? They say unto him, Caesar’s. Then saith he unto them, Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s. When they had heard these words,



they marvelled, and left him, and went their way.”

Here there is a deliberate attempt by the Pharisees to act out a part. The disciples had previously been warned against their deceitful ways. We now see the Pharisees at work, deliberately attempting by trickery to trap the Lord Jesus into making a seditious statement. In an effort to hide the origin of the enquiry, they deliberately joined up with their enemies, the Herodians, to sound out the Lord’s opinion.

This is hypocrisy at its very worst – pretending to be benevolent enquirers whilst plotting for a person’s ruin. Yet from this sordid episode comes a most wonderful answer that lays down the foundation for the relationship between the Christian and the state. This is the kind of hypocrisy that leads to the Lord’s severe condemnation: “The lord of that servant shall come in a day when he looketh not for him, and in an hour that he is not aware of, and shall cut him asunder, and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 24:50,51). These words of judgment bring before us the solemnity of a hypocritical, fraudulent piety that covers evil intentions.

### Honesty and openness

The last mention of hypocrisy is in James 3:17: “But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy”. It is significant that it is mentioned here since this epistle is concerned with the practice of Christianity, rather than doctrinal issues. One of the many criticisms made against Christians

is that of failing to live up to the lofty ideals of Christianity.

This failure would be lessened by our avoiding hypocrisy. We have seen that the Old Testament speaks of the lack of reality which lies at the core of hypocrisy. Have we a *living* faith in the Lord Jesus Christ? It is possible to pose as a Christian without having the inner life of the Spirit of God. May we never be guilty of the kind of hypocrisy that marked the Pharisees – the hypocrisy that postures benevolence but practises evil.

For many of us, the great danger is that spirit of hypocrisy caused by an inflated ego, when every device is used to inflate our persona. How sad it is when those who follow the Man who said that He was meek and lowly in heart use the profession of His name to gain the adulation of the crowd! What is more pernicious is that we are often not aware of it. We need to be honest and open in all things. May the Lord enable us, in the power of His Holy Spirit, to live as Micah instructed his people: “He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God” (Micah 6:8).



*Walk humbly  
with  
thy God*

# The Call of God

Donald Hill

*“I called you, but you did not answer” (Jeremiah 7:13) was God’s solemn charge against His people of old. This article looks at some of those individuals who, by contrast, answered to the call of God. Are we ready to listen to, and answer, His call?*

That God should choose to call any human being is a wonderful thing. It is especially so when there is a response on the part of the one who is called. The result of that can only be blessing, for this is the desire of God Himself. In this article, it will be helpful to look at (a) some of those in Scripture who heard the call (b) their response (c) the outcome.

## The call of Abraham

*Please read Genesis 12 onwards; Hebrews 11:8-10.*

Here the call of God is abundantly clear. Abraham was to get out from his country of residence and from those family ties which might hold him there. Ur of the Chaldees was a highly civilised society but its people were idol worshippers. The call was for *separation* from this idolatrous people so that Abraham might know, walk with, and worship the living God who had called him. Along with the call came wonderful promises of blessings.

Abraham responded to the call but was accompanied at the outset by his father, Terah, his nephew, Lot, and others. It was not until after the death of Terah that Abraham moved on to Canaan. This would teach us that we need to beware of family influences which might hinder our spiritual progress.

It wasn’t until Abraham arrived in Canaan, the land of blessing, that he had a

further revelation from God and an accompanying promise. Here in the land, Abraham had a tent and an altar. In this way, he was both a pilgrim and a worshipper and “called upon the name of the LORD” (Genesis 12:8).

Hebrews 11 throws further light on Abraham’s call. Obedience and faith were active in him; he had in view a city of permanence. The cities of men pass off the scene, but the builder of the city which Abraham had in view was God Himself. That city was well founded (v.10). So today, we are reminded, “Here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come” (Hebrews 13:14). Before He left His disciples for the cross, Jesus prayed to His Father for His disciples, “They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth” (John 17:16,17).

## Lessons for us:

1. Obedience to God’s call brings blessing.
2. Family ties and relationships can hinder our progress.
3. Separation from an evil world is the Lord’s desire for His people.

*Obedience to God’s call brings blessing*

4. We should be marked as pilgrims passing through this world. On the way, there should be worship arising from our hearts to the One who has called us.

### The call of Moses

*Please read Exodus 3 onwards; Hebrews 11:24-26.*

Moses had left behind him the land of Egypt with all its glory and the splendour of its palace. He was now a shepherd, living in a desert. But it is there in the desert of Horeb, rather than the palace of Egypt, that he hears the call of God from the bush which burned but was not consumed. Moses had, no doubt, seen many dried up bushes burst into flames under the heat of the desert sun, but here was something spectacular.

Following God's call, "Moses, Moses" (Exodus 3:4), and Moses' response, Moses has to learn first of all something of the holiness of the God who called. Isaiah, too, in his vision had to learn a similar lesson. He heard the seraphim proclaim, "Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts" (Isaiah 6:3).

If holiness is an attribute of God Himself, it follows that believers, as children of God, should demonstrate that same quality. So Paul writes to the Romans, "Yield your members (i.e. arms, legs, etc.) servants to righteousness unto holiness... Being made free from sin, and become servants to God, you have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life" (see Romans 6:18-23).

### Lessons for us:

1. Moses turned his back on Egypt, its glories and its sinful pleasures.

Where do we stand in our attitude to this world?

2. Moses identified himself with God's despised people, so suffering reproach for Christ (Hebrews 11:26).
3. Moses learned something of the holiness of the God who had called him.
4. Moses was marked by faith, as were his parents, Amram and Jochebed (see Exodus 2).

### The call of Joshua

*Please read Joshua 1 onwards; Hebrews 11:30.*

The death of Moses is recorded for us in Deuteronomy 34; the call of Joshua is recorded in the next chapter, Joshua 1. Servants of the Lord, brothers and sisters in Christ, are called home but the work of God goes on. Joshua was assured of the Lord's support in his service: "As I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not fail you or forsake you. Be strong and of a good courage".

In just the same way, the Lord promises to be with each succeeding generation. As we take our stand in what could be a hostile environment – our school, our place of work, the locality where we live – the Lord Jesus will give to each one of us His unfailing support. The battle is His and the victory is assured!

"Earthly friends may fail and leave us,  
One day soothe, the next day grieve us,  
But this Friend will ne'er deceive us.  
Oh! how He loves!"

With the ark of the covenant leading the way before them, victory at Jericho was assured. Their failure at Ai was the result of sin in the camp of Israel; Achan was the culprit (see Joshua 7). A Babylonian garment, together with gold and silver,

were at the root of the problem. Significantly, it was from Babylon that, years earlier, Abraham had been called out.

### Lessons for us:

1. If we want to live for the Lord and His interests, He will be with us and give us the needed encouragement and support, in just the same way as He promised Joshua that He would be with him.
2. As older brothers and sisters in Christ are called home, younger believers are needed to fill up the ranks.
3. Victory is assured, but only as we engage in the conflict in a way which pleases the Lord.
4. Sin and disobedience in our lives will lead to failure.

### The call of Gideon

*Please read Judges 6-8; Hebrews 11:32,33.*

These were dark days in the history of Israel. Intermarrying of the Israelites with heathen tribes and the resultant worship of idols angered God. So He allowed other nations to punish Israel for their sins. The Midianites were one such nation; they afflicted Israel for seven years.

It was at this time that Gideon heard the call of God through the angel of the LORD (was this a pre-incarnation appearance of the Lord Jesus Himself?): "The LORD is with thee...thou shalt save Israel from the hand of the Midianites" (6:12,14). Gideon recognised his own weakness: "...behold, my family is poor in Manasseh, and I am the least in my Father's house" (6:15). In whose strength do we seek to serve the Lord – His or ours?

Following the Lord's word to him, that same night Gideon destroyed the altar to Baal, so testifying to the living God of Israel. Subsequently, 32,000 fighting men gathered around Gideon at the trumpet call. So that the Israelites could not boast that they themselves had won the battle, their number was reduced to 300. God was going to deliver Israel through weakness – and He did! Significantly, the battle cry of the Israelites was, "The sword of the LORD, and of Gideon" (7:20). The Israelites had learned to put God first!

### Lessons for us:

1. Mixing with heathen Midianites brought the anger of God on Israel. So as believers, we are exhorted, "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers" (2 Corinthians 6:14).
2. Gideon recognised his own personal weakness. That sense of weakness was deepened when his army was reduced to 300. The Lord's promise is "My strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9).
3. "The sword of the LORD" was the first cry of the Israelites. The battle, then and now, is His.
4. Broken vessels allowed the lights to shine out when the 300 men surrounded the Midianite camp (7:20). The broken vessels remind us of weakness and humility. We need to beware of pride which may stand in the way of victory.

### The call of Samuel

*Please read 1 Samuel 1-3.*

The book opens with a praying woman – Hannah, the wife of Elkanah. Her prayer is answered and the birth of Samuel follows. Hannah had previously committed

Samuel to the service of the Lord in the temple at Shiloh. When Samuel is old enough, his mother presents him to the Lord there. As she does so, she pours out her heart in thanksgiving to the Lord.

The priesthood at that time was marked by failure. Eli's sight was failing – his lack of visual discernment, alas, paralleled by his lack of spiritual discernment. His two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were evil men. In these dark days for Israel, Samuel, as a young boy serving the Lord in the temple, heard the call of God. Samuel was instructed by Eli to answer, "Speak, LORD; for thy servant heareth" (3:9). God then revealed forthcoming events to Samuel. Response to the call of God lets us into the secrets of the mind of God.

"Brought to rest within the circle  
Where love's treasures are displayed,  
There we drink the living waters,  
Taste the joys that never fade."

### Lessons for us:

1. We have a God who hears and answers prayer.
2. "Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it" (Proverbs 22:6).
3. Have we got the time and the ear to listen to what God wants to say to us?
4. God has given His scriptures of truth to us. As indwelt by the Holy Spirit, we can have an understanding of the mind and ways of God in the past, for the present, and also for the future (John 16:13).

### The call of Jonah

*Please read Jonah 1-4.*

Jonah was called to visit the wicked city of Nineveh with a warning from God that

the city would be destroyed within forty days. Jonah failed to answer this call and, in consequence, took four downward steps – down to Joppa, down into the ship, down into the lower deck of the ship, and finally down into the depths of the sea (1:3 twice, 5; 2:6). Jonah passed through painful experiences before realising that salvation was of the Lord alone. Brought up on dry land and called by God a second time to visit Nineveh, he was not disobedient!

### Lessons for us:

1. Disobedience often leads to downward steps. Let us beware!
2. Jonah's disobedience is in marked contrast to the perfect obedience of the Lord Jesus who could declare, "I do always those things that please [the Father]" (John 8:29).
3. Disobedience often leads to painful experiences.

### The call of Simon Peter and Andrew

*Please read Mark 1:16-18.*

Early in the ministry of the Lord Jesus, He met the brothers, Simon and Andrew. They were fishermen and, according to Mark's account, were casting their net into the sea (v.16). On hearing the Lord's call to leave their nets and follow the Lord, so becoming fishers of men, they were instantly obedient. In John's account, we learn that it was Andrew who had earlier introduced Simon to Jesus.

The Acts of the Apostles records the great catches of men and women in which Peter was involved. As part of that fishing operation, the door of faith was opened to both Jews and Gentiles – to the Jews on the day of Pentecost and to the Gentiles first

through Cornelius, the Roman centurion, and his household (see chapters 2 and 10).

Like Andrew and Peter, we, too, have been called by the Lord to His service. Each Christian is called to serve as a holy priest, offering up spiritual sacrifices, and as a royal priest, showing to the world at large the excellencies of Him who has called us out of darkness into His marvelous light (1 Peter 2:5,9).

### Lessons for us:

1. Like Andrew and Peter, we have been called to serve the Lord. There is no retirement in His service. To what extent are we involved in Gospel outreach to men and women in a world fast going on to judgment? We need to ask, as Saul of Tarsus did, "Lord, what do You want me to do?"
2. If, like Andrew, we introduce one person to the Lord Jesus, that person might become a servant whom the Lord is able to use just like Peter, in spite of his failings. Few people have heard of William Holland, yet he was used of the Lord to bring John Wesley to saving faith in Christ. John Wesley, in turn, was used to the salvation of thousands.

### The call of James and John

*Please read Mark 1:19,20.*

James and John, like Peter and Andrew, were fishermen. They were in their boat, mending their nets – a very necessary service, otherwise the fish would escape! Spiritual net-menders are very much needed in the Church today in a day of fragmentation. Theirs is a ministry of building up rather than scattering. That building up must come about on the basis

of the truth set out in Scripture. It would be good if, as individuals and collectively as assemblies, we took stock and put wrongs right, as and where necessary. First of all, this would be for the Lord's glory and, secondly, for the blessing and prosperity of fellow believers.

### Lessons for us:

1. Am I a net mender or a net breaker? Does my service for the Lord result in the binding together of the people of God or to their scattering?
2. Do I/we need to make adjustments to maintain the Lord's honour and glory?

*Lord, what do You  
want me to do?*

### A collective call

The call of the Lord to the church at Laodicea still challenges us today: "Behold, I stand at the door, and am knocking: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me. To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches" (Revelation 3:20-22).

This call of the Lord comes to us both as individuals and as companies of His people. The Lord looks for a place in our hearts, our lives, our affections. He would bring to us that burning of heart which the two on the road to Emmaus experienced with Him (Luke 24:32). How often do we

experience this? The Lord Jesus looks for and loves reality.

### Summary

Looking at the different people who responded to God's call, we can identify the following key features:

Abraham – separation.

Moses – the holiness of God.

Joshua – divine support promised for the conflict.

Gideon – the need to recognise our own

personal weakness.

Samuel – we are let into the secrets of the heart and mind of God.

Jonah – obedience is the hallmark of the true servant.

Peter and Andrew – we should be involved in Gospel outreach.

James and John – we should seek to build up, not to scatter.

A day of failure – we should have hearts open to the Lord's call.

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# Lessons from Isaiah ch. 40 for Today

## Part 2. vv.3-5

Mark Davison

*The coming of the Lord Jesus into the world was no haphazard event. It was, rather, part of God's deliberate purpose, planned for and promised. Several people had parts to play in this plan, especially John the Baptist. This article looks at God's plan for John and is an encouragement that God also has a plan for each one of us. His sure word is to be trusted.*

In part 1, we saw that this chapter is given as a message of comfort for the Israelite exiles in Babylon. We noted that three voices speak in verses 3, 6, and 9. Here we will look at the first of these voices, found in verses 3-5. "A voice of one calling, "In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all

mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken" ”.

In ancient times, it was the custom when an eastern monarch was to visit, for a herald to go ahead and proclaim the coming of the king. Having been warned, the people would prepare for the visit, including repairing the roads. So we see in these

*A highway  
for our God*

verses the proclamation of the long-awaited Messiah. “The Lord is coming,” says the voice. “Prepare the way.” In speaking of ‘straightening roads’ and ‘levelling of hills and valleys’, the prophet is not speaking of the literal return of the exiles from Babylon. Rather, this is a picture of the Lord coming to their aid. The associated challenge to their faith is to await His arrival. Their faith, surely, will overcome all obstacles. V.5 speaks of the glory of the Lord, which would be revealed to them in His very presence with them (cf. the Lord’s presence in the pillar of cloud (Exodus 16:10)). So here is a wonderful promise for them to hold on to by faith – in a coming day, they would not only see Him, but experience His glorious presence (v.5: ‘will see it’).

As we look at these verses with the benefit of centuries of hindsight, we can see the fulfilment of them in the coming of Jesus. We, too, can say that by faith in Him we can overcome all obstacles (Matthew 17:20). Sad to say, when the Messiah was revealed to the Jews, they did not receive Him. There will yet, however, be a time when He will come to their aid once more, in an even more literal fulfilment of these verses.

Perhaps the most pertinent question in these verses is this: Who is the herald? Luke 3:2-6 leaves us in no doubt as to the answer. Here we see quite clearly that these words of Isaiah are applied to John the Baptist. Luke 1:17 gives us a good summary of his role and it will be instructive to look at this verse in some detail.

#### **“He will go on before the Lord”**

This is the task of the herald as we saw above, being carried out by John. He would bear the good news that the

Messiah, their long-awaited King, was coming. In so doing, he would prepare the hearts of the people spiritually for His arrival. John had no great event in the sky, accompanied by lightening and thunder, to foretell, for by the time that John began his preaching, the Lord was, of course, among them. There were many who heard John’s message and, by faith, obeyed the call to repentance. There were many more, however, who refused to believe.

Proclaiming the message of God today can be a thankless task. People ignore you or mock you. Often, little result or reward is seen. John may have felt something of this rejection.

#### **“in the spirit and power of Elijah”**

The similarities between John the Baptist and the Old Testament prophet, Elijah, are striking. They were men of the same disposition and spirit. The austerity of their lives and their style of dress were also remarkably alike (cf. Mark 1:6 with 2 Kings 1:8). Both shared a fervent zeal for true religion and a passionate desire for a restoration of all that had been neglected in their nation. Both taught in the wilderness. Both reproved kings and suffered for it. It is interesting to note that many other ancient Jewish writings also stated that Elijah would precede the coming of the Messiah (see Matthew 17:10-13). We would do well to learn some of these characteristics from these two mighty, fearless (most of the time!) men of God.

#### **“to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children”**

These words are a quotation from Malachi 4:6 where is added “and the hearts of the children to their fathers”.

The Jewish religion in the time of Jesus was very divided. On many occasions, these disputes divided families (as still, alas, so often occurs in the church setting!). The most prominent of these divisions which we read about in the Gospels was that between the Pharisees and the Sadducees. John came with a message of reconciliation, seeking to bring them to a knowledge of the coming Messiah and the faith and unity which they would find in Him. Unity has always been God's desire for His people. This is especially emphasised in Ephesians 2:13,14, where we read that Jesus came for the purpose of uniting mankind in Himself. In the true church, as seen by God, there are no barriers. Sadly, the best efforts of man have only caused numerous divisions in the visible church in the world.

**“and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous”**

Have you ever wondered at the marvelous change which God can bring about? Think of the sinner who repents. What a change!! His eternal destination is now heaven, not hell. He is indwelt by the Holy Spirit and endowed with all the wisdom of Christ. Praise God that He frees us from sin so that we can correctly and righteously deal with the issues of life – matters such as poverty, sickness, evil – seeing them now in their right perspective.

**“to make ready a people prepared for the Lord”**

The wilderness was a wild and rugged wasteland. This reflected John's message to the people. He told them that they were in a spiritual 'wild', and called them to repentance (Luke 3:3), warning them of the coming kingdom of God. He then bap-

tised those who repented as a sign of their preparation. In all of this, John constantly magnified the Lord Jesus, never Himself. He knew his own position in God's plans (Mark 1:7; John 3:30). What an amazing example of humility and self-sacrifice John sets us! As Jesus began His public ministry, John was removed from the picture – imprisoned and dismissed. This was all in the plans of God, for now His Son must have the prominent place. The Lord, however, commended John for his faithfulness.

Sadly, the Jews were looking for a political or military leader who would overthrow the Roman occupation and have his headquarters in Jerusalem. They were not looking for spiritual freedom, and so the majority did not listen to what John said. People are just the same today, looking everywhere for fulfilment, but not considering their spiritual welfare which alone can give that fulfilment.

In considering these verses from the prophecy of Isaiah, then, we see the remarkable way in which God works out His plans, and so fulfils the prophecies given hundreds of years previously. If God so clearly keeps His word, surely we can rely on it today!



*Unity...  
God's desire  
for  
His people*

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# The Man of Sorrows

*“He is despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief”*

*(Isaiah 53:3)*

The pride of careless greatness  
Could wash its hands of Thee;  
Priests, that should plead for weakness,  
Must Thine accusers be!

Man's boasting love disowns Thee;  
Thine own Thy danger flee;  
A Judas only owns Thee  
That Thou may'st captive be.

On him who had disowned Thee  
Thine eye could look in love –  
'Midst threats and taunts around Thee –  
To tears of grace to move.

The robber learned beside Thee,  
Upon the cross of shame –  
While taunts and jeers deride Thee –  
The savour of Thy name.

O Lord! Thy wondrous story  
My inmost soul doth move;  
I ponder o'er Thy glory –  
Thy lonely path of love!

*J.N.Darby*

*“Jesus...who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God”*

*(Hebrews 12:2)*