

The SCRIPTURE STANDARD

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"Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us looking unto Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith"

Editorial Thoughts concerning the early Church

I have recently spent a fair amount of time (but by no means enough) studying the political, social and religious environment in which the early Church had to grow up (particularly focussing on the period from the ministry of Jesus through to the early 4th century), and in doing that I have realised just how much I **don't** know about that environment. Even now, I know that I have only scratched the surface of what is a huge area of, particularly, Jewish, Roman and Greek political, social and religious history and yet it has triggered a number of thoughts in my mind. It simply would

not be feasible to rehearse all of the circumstances of the early years of Christianity in a brief article so I shall have to assume to a large extent that you, the reader, have the knowledge to place some of these thoughts into the context that they deserve (and I appreciate that many readers will already have significantly more knowledge than my recent investigations have achieved).

WHEN THE TIME WAS FULLY COME

I think we all readily understand that scripture teaches that there was going to come a point in history when God would deem that the time was right for Jesus to come into the world. It's a self evident truth that if there was to be a 'right time', then it must have been at the time that Jesus did in fact appear – a time of God's choosing. In one sense it is tempting to suggest that Jesus could have become manifest in the flesh at any time and that God could have used any circumstances to progress His plan of salvation. However, in hindsight, it is equally tempting to look back and conjecture as to why the time might have been right for Jesus to appear when he did and some of the following circumstances might have been relevant to that decision:

- the Roman Empire had extended into Judea around the time of Jesus birth and at least initially was a fairly benign occupying power; provided people paid their taxes and weren't troublesome, Rome was content for things to

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'rub along' without too much interference; so Jesus and his disciples could move around and teach reasonably freely;

- the Roman Empire was poised to grow to its fullest extent by domination of North Africa, the eastern Mediterranean, Asia Minor, southern Europe across to Spain, and northern Europe to France and even England over the next 100 years or so; this provided a fair degree of political stability and relative ease of movement and communication;
- thus, the 'Gentile world' was under a single 'military' authority – itself a much better prospect for the embryonic Church than a fragmented, conflict situation;
- the Jewish hierarchy was firmly re-established in Jerusalem and the Pharisees and Sadducees had developed their distinctive philosophies; male Jews were required (and free) to make frequent 'pilgrimages' into Jerusalem especially for the 3 major festivals and would eventually carry news about the activities of Jesus back to their communities with them;
- there was already a Jewish dispersion amongst the Roman Empire and Christianity would initially spread through those communities.

This of course is a very meagre overview of the position in the 1st century and it would be wrong to imply that everything was 'sweetness and light' because periods of Christian persecution undoubtedly ensued. But the potential for the spread of the gospel outside of Judea does seem to have existed.

CHRISTIANITY 'AS IT WAS IN THE BEGINNING'

Whilst the above is in the realm of speculation the next reflection will possibly be more contentious in the eyes of many readers (not, I add, for the mere sake of being contentious; I can only honestly reflect my thoughts). Many Christians over the years have expressed a plea for a 'complete return to Christianity as it was in the beginning'. This magazine carried the same sentiment for many years on its front cover. That statement probably means different things to different people, however I'm not sure that there is such a definable expression as 'Christianity as it was in the beginning'. The statement implies that, since the time of Christ, Christianity has been a static, unchanging phenomenon. Now if we understand 'Christianity' to be the truth with regard to the nature and purpose of our Lord, Jesus Christ, and the facts concerning his life, death and resurrection, then we are on solid ground. There most certainly was a 'core' message that was at the heart of apostolic teaching – as, for example, was preached on the Day of Pentecost and by Stephen to the Council (Acts 6) - and it stressed (particularly to the Jews initially) that Jesus was the promised and prophesied Messiah, the Son of God; that he had come to bring reconciliation back to God; that He had suffered and died for mankind's redemption; that he had died to bring salvation and that, gloriously, God had raised Him from the dead.

However it is also true that the early Church was a dynamic, evolving body. As we noted earlier the initial spread of the gospel was through already established Jewish communities, and, quite naturally, many early Jewish converts maintained many of their historic 'religious' traditions even after accepting Christ as Messiah. Later, as the gospel spread to Greek (Gentile) communities, Christians with a Jewish tradition had to learn how to interact with Gentile converts (and vice versa). It was a real clash of cultures and religious heritage and the evidence is that where these two 'strands' of early Christian development came into close contact, the integration was far from easy. Whilst the Jewish converts had a rich 'religious' heritage, many Gentile converts came from backgrounds that were based on pagan rituals and idol worship. Even those two massive bulwarks of the early Church, Peter and Paul, couldn't see eye to eye on how that integration would work and had to seek advice from the council in Jerusalem on the way forward. The early Church then was a living, learning organism, reliant largely on the testimony of the apostles and the eyewitnesses of Christ's life

and teaching for its foundational truths. Quite what is meant by 'Christianity as it was in the beginning' has been the subject of debate for many, many years, but it is difficult to contemplate that the **form** of worship that the Jewish Christians in and around Judea and the dispersed communities exercised would be exactly mirrored by the Gentile communities in, say, the Greek-influenced areas of Asia Minor. Of course the **object** of worship was consistently Jesus, the Christ, but even in this respect much of the focus of Paul's epistles was to ensure that a proper understanding of the person and nature of Jesus was spread throughout the growing Christian communities. This leads to another observation.

RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY IN 1ST CENTURY AND BEYOND

We often bemoan the fact that there are so many 'denominations' around in the world today. It is, though, no recent phenomenon because the early Church too had to contend with its own plethora of contemporary religious and philosophical ideas. A paper of Martin Luther King entitled 'The Influence of the Mystery Religions on Christianity' states that **"the Greco-Roman world in which the early Church developed was one of diverse religions. The conditions of that era made it possible for these religions to sweep like a tidal wave over the ancient world. The people of that age were eager and zealous in their search for religious experience. The existence of this atmosphere was vitally important to the development and eventual triumph of Christianity"**. There was a whole phalanx of "isms" to contend with such as the several hundred year old cult of Zoroastrianism, Mithraism, Gnosticism, Marcionism, Montanism to name but a few. Judaism had the highly rigid Sadducees and Essenes, as well as the Pharisees, Epicureans and the Zealots. There were mystical religions, Greek philosophers, magic and the powerful pagan gods and rituals to worship. The Oxford History of Christianity states: **"The Gentile world was full of gods, local regional deities for the most part, who needed to be placated with sacrifices to ensure good crops, fertile spouses, successful commercial ventures, or even military victory for the emperor's army"**.

In other words there were several alternatives to, and influences upon, Christianity and one of the key battlegrounds, and the subject of much of Paul's teaching in his epistles, was to try to ensure a proper understanding of the nature of Jesus as God in the flesh. Gnostic philosophy with its concept of secret wisdom (and Gnosticism was very much more widespread and complex than we often give it 'credit' for) was especially prevalent and Paul takes several opportunities to refute its principal premises. In fact it becomes evident from Paul's epistles and letters to the young Christian communities that the recognition of the true and full nature of Jesus was the central tenet of his teaching and we therefore must conclude that this is vitally important for us too as it still stands as the ultimate bedrock of our faith. Unless Jesus is the prophesied Messiah, the one through whom God was to reconcile to the world to himself, then the whole edifice our faith crumbles - and Paul, fresh from his personal experience with the Lord, knew this better than anyone.

EXPECTANCY FOR CHRIST'S RETURN

It is now of course some 2000 years since Jesus was born into the world. It is no coincidence, and is testament to the massive influence that Jesus exerts, that even today Jesus' work and nature, and that of the Father, is probably the most fiercely debated topic around. But much of that debate today is academic, philosophical and placed in a social context rather than being Christ-centred. Yet I believe that another fundamental influence on the early Church following the death and resurrection of Jesus was the vibrant belief amongst the apostles and early Christian converts that

the return of the Christ was imminent – and probably in their lifetimes! Maybe by the end of the first century this particular expectation was beginning to wane but it does seem that the common view was the expectation of His early return. And why wouldn't it be so? Jesus had not been at all specific about his future actions and whilst making it clear that he was to return, was generally enigmatic about times and dates and seasons. However the early Church seems to have had a sense of expectation; the saints in Thessalonica were worried about those who had fallen asleep before Christ had returned; Paul wrote to the Philippians about 'eagerly awaiting' a Saviour from heaven; James wrote that 'the Lord's coming is near – the Judge is standing at the door'; and in the letter to the Hebrews, the exhortation is to "encourage one another, and so much the more as you see the day approaching". I have little personal doubt that this was the expectation of the early Christians and inevitably fuelled their enthusiasm for Christ. Today, we have become used to, and most probably very blasé, about Christ's 'delayed' return. We intone the words about Christ returning unexpectedly 'as a thief in the night', but predominantly live our lives without the urgency and expectation of His imminent return, assuming that tomorrow will **always** come around. A thousand years is still as a day to our Lord and a day still as a thousand years. Maybe we need to recapture **our** expectation of Christ's return and live accordingly.

GOD'S DIRECTION OF EVENTS

Perhaps one of the great imponderables in connection with the development of the early Church is the extent of the direct influence of God on the events that unfolded. The vast majority of Christians that I know accept that the apostles were the recipients of special spiritual gifts and that they had the authority, through the laying on of hands, of passing on those gifts. It also most commonly believed that as the apostles died (or were martyred) and the apostolic age came to an end, those special gifts went with them. Apart from that we know that the Lord directly intervened to commission Paul as a chosen vessel with a special mission. We know too, from Acts, that the Holy Spirit intervened at times to direct Paul on his missionary tours. The Jerusalem Council certainly believed that it was influenced by the Holy Spirit in its deliberations about the questions brought from Antioch (Acts 15). Quite where 'direct influence' begins and ends is a remarkably difficult area. Some believe that the translators of the Hebrew Scriptures into the Septuagint version were inspired; others contend that the deliberations of the Council of Nicaea in AD325 to settle the canon of Scripture, was an inspired body. Was God then at work, for example, in seminal events such as those that led up to the Jewish rebellion in AD66 that culminated in that most defining act – the siege and ultimate destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple? The subsequent dispersion certainly helped the spread of the Gospel but thousands died during the 7 years of the war, siege and its aftermath.

The issues faced by the early Church were many and varied as we have outlined above and it's certain that there hasn't been a seamless transition of 'Church of Christ' practice from the 1st to the 21st centuries as some, almost sanitised ideas of 'our' history seem to imply. Indeed as 'church' and state came together from the 4th century onwards we have little knowledge of how '1st century Christianity' survived as eastern and western religious orthodoxy went their separate ways. However as Christians in the 21st century we have, like all Christians before us, the sure conviction of an enormously rich heritage and we owe a deep debt of gratitude to all of those who have sustained the faith over the years. More than that we must constantly remember all that we owe to the Father and our Saviour, Jesus the Christ. "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent His only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that He loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins." 1 John 4:9.

THE SEVEN LETTERS TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES (6)

(Ian S. Davidson, Motherwell)

SARDIS



Sardis was the capital of Lydia, a district in the centre of the Western slope of Asia Minor. The last king of Lydia was the famous Croesus, who was eventually defeated by Cyrus the Persian in 546 BC. Croesus is synonymous with gold, which he panned from the Pactolus, a stream which flowed through Sardis.

The fall of Sardis to the Persians came as a great shock to the citizens of the fortress-citadel because they thought it was impregnable. But the Persians found a weak spot in the defences and, under cover of darkness, took the city. Later, similar tactics led to the fall of the city again in 214 BC by Antiochus the Great. From 133 BC, the Romans controlled the city and the surrounding area. In AD 17, during the reign of Tiberius, Sardis was devastated by an earthquake, which also destroyed eleven other Asian cities.

The patron deities of Sardis were Cybele and Artemis. A few remains of a temple to the latter can still be seen. In fact, two of the seventy-eight columns, 58 feet high, still stand. Also, the remains of a huge Jewish synagogue have been discovered in Sardis.

THE LETTER

We read: "...I know your deeds, you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead" (3: 1b, N.I.V.). God always sees the reality. Nothing can be hidden from Him. "But all things are naked and open unto the eyes of Him with whom we have to do" (Hebrews 4:13b). The cry is: "Be watchful!" It surely is an appropriate cry given the events in the past that led to the downfall of the city. A number of commentators have pointed out that, as saints, we must be watchful at our weakest point and at our strongest point. Further we read: "...for I have not found your works perfect before God" (2b). In other words, they were going through the motions, but the real essence was lacking. They lacked real love, faith, service and patient endurance (2:19).

"Remember therefore what you have received and heard, and hold fast, and repent" (3a). It is always easy to forget. Satan wants us to forget as much as possible, if not everything. We recall the words of Peter in his second epistle: "This second epistle, beloved, I now write unto you; in both which I stir up your pure minds by way of remembrance; that you may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us the apostles of the Lord and Saviour..." (3:1,2). Jesus goes on to give them a clear warning: "If therefore you shall not watch, I will come on you as a thief, and you shall not know what hour I will come upon you" (3b). Again, the appropriateness of these words can be seen from

the historical events. Paul and Peter both stated that, "the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night" (1 Thessalonians 5:2; 2 Peter 3:10). No wonder that the saints must be on their guard at all times.

WHITE CLOTHING

Ancient Sardis was well known for its woollen industry. Trade in dyes developed as a consequence. It is no surprise to read, therefore, the words: "You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy. He who overcomes, the same shall be clothed in white raiment..." (4, 5a). There are garments of the body and there are garments of the soul. Does God care what people wear? Yes, especially what they wear spiritually. "White" speaks of purity, festivity and victory. Jesus once said: "Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8). Paul encouraged his son in the faith, Timothy, to keep himself pure (1 Timothy 5:22b); and Peter wrote: "Seeing you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, see that you love one another fervently..." (1 Peter 1:22). Purity now will lead to festivity and victory later. Further on in Revelation we read: "Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to Him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and His wife has made herself ready. And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints" (19: 7,8). "And the armies which were in heaven followed Him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean" (19:14).

THE BOOK OF LIFE

The book of life is mentioned six times in the book of Revelation (3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27). We also find such a book in the Old Testament in Exodus 32:32; Psalm 69:28; Psalm 139:16; Daniel 12:1; Malachi 3:16. Cities in ancient times kept a register of their citizens. Death meant removal of the name. A name will not be blotted out of the book of life because of physical death. Sin or rebellion against the Almighty could result in this action being taken. What matters above all, dear disciple, is that your name remains in that book or record. We read: "And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of the things which were written in the books, according to their works" (Revelation 20:12). "It would seem that in regard to the multitudes of the impenitent and the wicked, the judgement will proceed *on their deeds* in general; in regard to the righteous, it will turn on the fact that their names had been enrolled in the book of life. That will be sufficient to determine the nature of the sentence that is to be passed on them. He will be safe whose name is found in the book of life; no one will be safe who is to have his destiny determined by his own deeds" (Albert Barnes).

CONFESSION

We read: "...but I will confess his name before my Father and before His angels" (3:5b). Jesus will publicly acknowledge the overcomers as His very own. Two other passages come to mind here: Matthew 10:32, which reads: "Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father who is in heaven"; and Luke 12:8,9: "Also I say unto you, whosoever shall confess me before men, him shall the Son of man also confess before the angels of God: but he who denies me before men shall be denied before the angels of God."



What do you think?

THE WEARING OF RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS

The recent controversy over the British Airways employee, Nadia Eweida, visibly wearing a cross and chain around her neck as a sign of her Christian faith (to her work as a check-in clerk) has raised any number of interesting questions. No doubt this particular issue has been given greater publicity because it has been set alongside the other recent controversy about the wearing of the veil by Muslim women and only this week a Muslim teacher in a Church of England school in Dewsbury, England was sacked from her job for insisting on wearing the full veil whilst she was teaching, on the basis that the pupils were finding it difficult to learn in those circumstances.

You may recall that British Airways initially told their female employee to take unpaid leave for visibly wearing the cross and chain. BA claimed that it was contrary to their dress and uniform code and if it was to be worn should be worn invisibly under her clothing. The employee said that she was a Christian and that the cross was a symbol of her faith and that she should be free to express her faith in that way – in her terms 'Jesus had to be glorified'. Following her suspension BA reviewed the case and originally concluded that she should not be allowed to wear the cross and chain only to have to step back from that judgement following the strong public reaction against that decision. One of the interesting statements from BA during the case was that if symbols of faith were to be worn then they should be worn covertly and non-publicly though Sikhs are allowed to wear turbans and Muslims, hijabs on the basis that it is impractical to wear these under clothing.

Below are some of the opinions that have been expressed:

"I believe that it is a very important issue on the matter of expressing Christianity and employees having their say in the way they express their faith." Nadia Eweida

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, said he regarded it as "absolutely basic" that people of any faith should have the right to display the signs of their faith commitment in public.

David Cannings, chairman of Christians in Politics, which encourages people in public office to make their faith part of their work, said religious imagery was becoming marginalised. "We think such ostentatious expressions of faith are starting to be pushed into the background in an attempt to treat people equally and I think there's a danger that faith will be pushed into the background at the same time."

Austen Ivereigh, a Catholic writer and journalist, said British Airways was being perfectly reasonable. "There are a lot of ways to demonstrate your faith. The true Christian witness is the love you show people that makes people wonder where you got that from, and you can tell them. A crucifix has become a fashion item worn by rap artists."

What do you think?

Churches of Christ have a long history of avoiding the use of 'imagery' in our buildings where it would be rare indeed to find symbols of the cross, stained glass windows, images of Christ etc.

- **Does the wearing of a cross or crucifix as a symbol of faith offend you?**
- **Does the wearing of such symbols make a positive, public statement of our faith and should it be more widely encouraged?**
- **What about the more recent 'fish symbol' lapel badge (often seen on car boots as well)?**
- **Is this the 'thin end of the wedge' and the start of prohibition of the public expression of Christian (and other) faith(s)?**
- **Is it right (or possible) to try to avoid causing 'offence' to people of alternative religious faiths?**
- **Which of the above quotes (if any) most closely represents your opinion?**

If you feel that you want to comment on any of these issues or present scriptural teaching on these or related matters than please forward by post or email to the Editor – details on the back page.

Understanding the Seasons of Life

Lesson 1 - Introduction

David Yasko, USA

This article is the start of a series called "Growing In The Seasons Of Life". Let me start by saying that the seasons of life dramatically affect our relationships. Those of us who are married, have you figured out yet that you and your spouse are often in different seasons? That's why things don't mesh sometimes. As families, we are always either growing together or growing apart. We never stand still. And if we understand the seasons of life we can't help but be more understanding when somebody goes through something we've already been through. When God created the earth he set up seasons of weather. *Genesis 8:22 "As long as the earth endures, there will be spring time and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, and day and night will never cease."* But God has also established seasons of human activity. Seasons of relationships, both spiritual and physical, seasons of emotions and *Ecclesiastes 3:1* tells us, **"There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven."** The New Century Version, a version translated by members of the Churches of Christ, translates this as "... everything on earth has its special season." We go through various seasons in order to mature and grow. I want to give you five general facts about the seasons of life, then look at how to make the most of the seasons of our lives, no matter which one of them you're in. So here are **FIVE FACTS ABOUT THE SEASONS OF LIFE:**

1. THEY ARE BEYOND MY CONTROL.

We can't control when they happen, we can't control how long they'll stay. We can't control the location or the duration. In fact, most new seasons in life begin with an irritation, interruption or inconvenience. When we go into a new season, our neat little schedule just gets thrown out of the door. And because of something that happens all of our plans get scrapped and we have to redraw them. Take, for example, grief. Grief is a season we'll all face. It may be an extended illness where we grieve because we can't do the things we used to, or the death of someone we weren't ready to say good-bye to. But it's a season and we can't control it. In fact, the frustrating thing is that we can predict what the seasons will be in our lives, we just can't figure out when they're going to happen or which one is going to happen next. Waiting is a season of life. You want to know how come we have to wait so much? Because so many things are out of our control. If you could control it, you wouldn't have to wait. So the seasons of our life are uncontrollable and no matter what we'd like to do about it, it's not going to happen. OK, if the seasons of life are out of our control, then who controls them. *Daniel 2:21 "God controls the times and seasons; he sets up kings and deposes them."* God is in control of world events; God is in control and our world is moving toward the destiny he has in mind.

2. THEY ARE OFTEN CONFUSING.

Have you ever been in a situation and thought, "why is this happening to me." In fact, understanding usually follows an experience. It hardly ever precedes it. That means we understand the seasons we're in after they're over. We are going to have things happen in our lives that we will never understand. And God does not owe you an explanation as to why they happened. In fact, you aren't going to get an

explanation until you get to heaven because God wants to teach us to live by faith, not by explanations. Look at *Ecclesiastes 3:11* "God does everything just right and on time, but people can never completely understand what he is doing." That's right. Because if you could understand everything God does and why God does it, you'd be God. And we aren't God.

3. GOD HAS A PURPOSE FOR EACH SEASON.

He has a purpose for the lonely seasons, and the successful seasons. *Romans 8:28* "We know that all that happens to us is working for our good IF we love God and are fitting into his plans." You see, there are a couple of things in that verse that tell us it's not for everybody. It only works for our good if we love God and are fitting into his plans or will, and those take faith. If we love God and fit into his plans then nothing comes into our lives that hasn't been filtered by God. God never does anything by accident and he's got a plan for the seasons of our lives. Even the bad times? Even the bad times. Don't misunderstand me. God doesn't have to programme all the problems in our lives. He doesn't need to, we do just fine on our own. But he can, through his purpose, draw something good out of every one of those problems. God can only work all the problems for good if we're willing to give him the pieces and say, "here, you take it," and then make the most out of what he gives back.

4. THE SEASONS OF LIFE INCLUDE BOTH GOOD AND BAD TIMES.

We all have successes and failures. We all have wins and losses. The 28 most common seasons in life are found in *Ecclesiastes 3:2-8* "**A time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build, a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance, a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them, a time to embrace and a time to refrain, a time to search and a time to give up, a time to keep and a time to throw away, a time to tear and a time to mend, a time to be silent and a time to speak, a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace.**" This isn't an exhaustive list by any means. There may be four seasons on earth but there are dozens in life. There is a season of gain, and a season of loss, and loss is probably our most difficult season. There's a season of keeping and a season of throwing away. Life is a mixture of ups and downs, that's my point. Ray Stevens sang that song years ago that went "Everything Is Beautiful In Its Own Way." And he misquoted *Ecclesiastes 3:11*. The verse says God makes everything beautiful in its own time. And there is a big difference. Cancer is not beautiful. Child abuse is not beautiful. And some of you will be going through a season right now that is not beautiful; in fact, it's downright ugly. Your finances look ugly. Your health looks ugly. Your friendships look ugly. Your marriage looks ugly. I want to say this to you. God will bring good out of it and he can make something beautiful if you'll just give him the pieces.

5. WHAT I SEW IN ONE SEASON, I'LL REAP IN ANOTHER SEASON.

Every farmer knows this. You plant in spring and you harvest in the fall. You don't plant on Monday and harvest on Friday. Our mothers used to tell us, "the bad habits you develop at home and at school are going to carry on in your marriage and your career." They were right. The way we respond right now is definitely going to affect our future. If we respond correctly, even when we don't feel like it, it pays great dividends in the future. Notice *Galatians 6:9* "**Let us not be weary in doing well; for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not.**" So those are five facts about the seasons of life. Let's consider then: **HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF EACH**

SEASON. How can I grow, how can I develop, how can I be all God wants me to be. OK, regardless of the season of life you are in right now, there are at least four questions we all need to ask ourselves:

1. WHAT CAN I LEARN IN THIS SEASON OF LIFE?

Let's face it, there are some things that we only learn through experience. You can't learn them in a book. *Deuteronomy 11:2*, "**Remember what you have learned about the LORD your God through your experiences with him.**" So, in order to gain anything positive from the seasons of life we go through we have to remember one thing: Life is a test. Life is preparation for eternity. This is the warm up act, not the big show. We've got maybe 70 or 80 years here. We have forever there. When you're talking forever, 70 or 80 years is just a warm up act. God wants us to learn a lot of lessons in preparation for life over there. One of them is that he sent his Son to die for us and we are to grasp that and develop character qualities that we will take with us into eternity. So in every season, there is an important lesson for us to learn.

So the important question isn't "why is this happening to me?" It is, "what do you want me to learn?" We make a mistake when we waste a season, because it's not just an experience, it's an education. And what we learn makes the difference. I read this little poem that shows what I mean. "*Our ends are joined by a common link, with one we sit, and with one we think. Success depends on which we use. Heads I win, tails I lose.*" Now, let me give you two facts about the school of experience.

First, if you flunk a test in the school of life, you get to retake it until you get it right. Some of us have sat the same test 100 times and we still haven't got it. Those are the people who are still hassling with the same problems you were hassling with 20 years ago.

Second, just about the time we think we've graduated from the school of experience, we find there are more classes to take. As long as we're on earth, we'll always be in school. That verse tells us to remember what we've learned.

Those who forget the past tend to repeat their mistakes. Have you ever made the same mistake more than once? It's God saying, "you'll be here until you get it." A good way to avoid repeating mistakes is to keep a journal. It helps us to remember. And the first lesson God wants us to remember is found in *2 Corinthians 1:9*, "**These things happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God.**" We'll never know God is all we need until God is all we've got. I talked to a man who was dying of cancer and he told me, "I've been to the bottom and I know for sure God is rock solid".

2. WHAT CAN I ENJOY IN THIS SEASON OF LIFE?

People are funny. We always try to choose the best time to enjoy life. So we say, "as soon as business picks up ..." or "as soon as life slows down ... I'll take the time to enjoy myself." But God tells us "don't wait to enjoy your life, go ahead and enjoy it now!" *Ecclesiastes 1:8*, "**People ought to enjoy every day of their lives.**" That means enjoy the good ones and enjoy the bad ones because they are all gifts of God. *1 Thessalonians 5:18*, "**Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you.**" Let me lay out a concept for you to remember when you're trying to do this. Time is life and life is short. *James 4:14*, "**Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.**" In the grand scheme of things, we're a puff of smoke. How long does a puff of smoke last? Not long, and one of the fallacies we

operate under is "we've got plenty of time." I missed my kid's birthday, hey, he's got plenty left." No he doesn't. At least not ones he wants to spend with you. No, they're gone all too quickly.

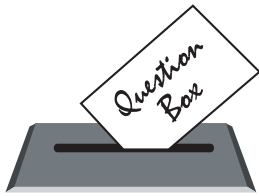
3. WHAT IS MOST IMPORTANT IN THIS SEASON OF LIFE?

Another fallacy is that we can have it all, all at one time. Great job, nice car, plenty of money, great family, great marriage. No we can't. We have to make some choices, some tough choices, about what really matters in our lives. *Ephesians 5:15-16*, "***Live life, then, with a due sense of responsibility, not as those who do not know the meaning and purpose of life but as those who do. Make the best use of your time, despite all the difficulties these days.***" So knowing we can't have it all, all at the same time, what are the important things that need our attention, right now. Maybe you have to give up that regular night out with your buddies because your family needs you. Maybe you have to give up the hunting lease because you want your kid to go to a Christian college and the money has to come from somewhere. So you make a tough choice. And in tough choices there is always good and bad. There is always giving and taking. But this is the season God has put you in and so decide and enjoy.

4. HOW CAN I HELP OTHERS IN THIS SEASON OF LIFE?

In other words, what good can I do during this season? The Bible tells us very clearly that we were not put on this earth just to live for ourselves. We were created for a life of good works. God gave us abilities, talents, and energy to help other people. We were not put here to be selfish, we were put here to help others. Now a lot of us have this very thing as our goal, "when things settle down." You know, "I'm going to teach a Bible class when things settle down." "I'm going to get involved in a ministry when things settle down." Well, they're not going to settle down. Be realistic. There will always be something to fill our schedules. So, let me ask. Are we doing what we were made by God to do, or are we spending all of our time and energy on ourselves. *Proverbs 3:27*, "***Do not withhold good from those who deserve it, when it is in your power to act.***" Each season gives us a unique chance to serve and when the season passes, so will that chance. *Ecclesiastes 11:4*, "***If you wait for perfect conditions, you will never get anything done.***" Do what we can, whenever we can, and stop waiting for perfect circumstances. People say, "one of these days ... I'm going to write that thank you note, or tell that person how much I enjoy their company, or one of these days I'm going to send some flowers." Look, when I die don't send any flowers to my funeral. I won't appreciate them. So, send them now. Better yet, send doughnuts or cinnamon rolls. Just don't play the someday game, because you won't. If you aren't willing to get involved right now, you won't get involved later. There will always be something telling you "you don't have time."

Somebody told me, "Dave, when I die, I want to give everything I have to the Church." I said, "Why not do it now." Don't wait until you're six feet under. Like I say, "*Do your givin' while you're livin, then you'll be knowin' where it's goin.*" There is no better time than right now to start serving God and each other. Most people are miserable in their lives for two reasons. They spend all their time regretting the past and all their time worrying about the future and when we spend our time like that, there is no time left to live today. So they never get anything done. The secret of happiness is giving our lives away. If we live for ourselves, we will never be happy. Jesus said if you lose your life, you find it. If you're a new member go to new member's class. You'll lose a couple of hours, but you'll gain some new friends. Once the hours are gone, they stay gone, but the friends are friends forever. Just don't live on "Someday I'll ..."



QUESTION: Does the Bible tell us ~ or warn us ~ about global warming?



Let me admit, at once, that I am not sure that I am the one to tackle a question on global warming, because I am not a geophysicist - or any sort of scientist, for that matter!

However, since, lately we have heard so very much about the plight of the Earth, and I do watch the television news and read the newspapers, I suppose that I know as much about the subject as the average intelligent adult, and I think I may also claim that I probably know rather more than the average adult about Bible teaching. And another reason for dealing with the subject is that it featured prominently on this morning's TV news!

1. What is 'Global Warming'?

First, we need to be sure that we understand what is meant by 'Global Warming' and why it is happening, because, since it is a phenomenon which has been identified and named relatively recently, various theories have been advanced to try to explain the origin of the problem.

The first - and, I suppose, most obvious culprit - was the sun. Global Warming, it was said, 'has a cosmic origin'. In other words, it is the sun's heat that is causing the polar ice caps to melt and the sea levels to rise, creating the danger of flooding on a massive scale. But the most recent research has rejected this theory, claiming that the problem is much more complicated, because the sun's output has not varied over the past 1000 years, and, in any case, the sun's heat alone is insufficient to cause global warming. So the cause has to be sought elsewhere.

2. WE are to blame!

It is now generally conceded that the problem has a human origin. We are, ourselves to blame for the problem, because our life-style, and in particular the life-style of the industrialized nations of the western world, is mainly responsible for the increased production of the carbon gases that are creating what has been called 'the greenhouse effect', which is causing the Earth to heat up.

Around the world, countries are becoming more and more aware of, and concerned about, the harm being done by the massive output of carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide exhausts, released both by our factories and our modern, cherished methods of transport. Sadly, there are still a few countries whose governments, for quite selfish financial reasons, persist in refusing to face up to the seriousness of the situation, or, are merely proposing 'sticking-plaster' cures for it, and it is a tragic comment on our world that the poorer nations, who are least responsible for creating the problem, are the ones who appear to suffer from it most.

3. A Summary.

This is what is believed to be happening. The Sun's energy creates our climate and our weather and heats the Earth's surface. Without this heat from the Sun, life on our planet would be impossible.

In turn, the Earth itself radiates energy back into space, dispelling excessive heat, and so creating a climate that we humans can tolerate. But, the gases I have already mentioned, carbon, methane, etc., rise from the Earth to form a barrier in the upper atmosphere, trapping this radiated energy and preventing its dispersion in much the same way as a greenhouse traps heat - hence the term 'Greenhouse Effect'. The result is that the Earth's temperature is gradually rising; and this is 'Global Warming'.

We have an example of what this means, provided by a very recent investigation conducted in a remote part of Siberia. It has been established that the 'permafrost'- (that is, the earth which

in polar regions remains permanently frozen throughout the year) – is thawing out and vast new lakes are being created. Even more serious is the fact that vegetation and fossil-remains, which for thousands of years have been frozen, are now being freed to release vast levels of methane into the atmosphere, thus adding to the problem.

4. A Second Problem!

We are also told that there is also another serious problem resulting from the creation of these carbon emissions. This is the problem of the damage being done to the 'Ozone Layer'. Again, explaining this very simply; just over six miles above the earth there is a layer in the stratosphere that contains a high level of ozone, which acts as a barrier, preventing harmful levels of the Sun's ultra-violet rays from reaching us. (You know, of course, that these are the rays which give you sunburn, and, far more seriously, cause skin cancer.)

The trouble is that these gases, known as CFCs, which we humans have created, are destroying, the 'Ozone Layer', and this is allowing dangerous radiation to reach the Earth. ('CFC' is the abbreviation for 'chlorofluorocarbons', the kinds of gases that have, until recently, been widely used in refrigeration, and aerosol sprays). Just how dangerous CFCs are, you will appreciate when I tell you that the scientists claim that one molecule of CFC gas takes about 15 years to rise up to reach the upper atmosphere, where it can survive for about a hundred years.

During that time, one molecule of CFC will destroy up to one hundred thousand molecules of ozone, weakening, or thinning out, the ozone layer, and, if mankind continues to neglect the problem, or ignores its cause, we are warned that the Earth will really experience 'Global Warming'. Even as I write this, I hear the television news-report warning of the 'irreparable damage' that will follow, if these problems are not treated urgently and seriously.

5. 'What does the Bible reveal about this problem?'

Well, the answer to this question is – Nothing! Although the scriptures reveal some truly fascinating scientific facts about our planet and our universe, such as the rotundity of the Earth and its suspension in space, the 'paths' in the seas, the 'hydrological cycle', the existence of an atmosphere, to name but a few, we should not use the Bible as a scientific textbook, or expect it to provide a solution to every problem which comes along to puzzle the scientists.

6. The Earth's Destiny.

This does not mean that the Bible is silent on the subject of the Earth's future. On the contrary, regardless of how mankind chooses to deal with its self-created problems, or with what method the nations attempt to resolve them, almost two thousand years ago the Holy Spirit, through the instrumentality of the apostle Peter, revealed in unequivocal language what will finally become of Planet Earth.

In Peter's second letter, chapter 3, there are statements which reveal what will eventually happen. Consider the following verses.

- "The heavens and the earth that now exist have been stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men" v.7.
- "The day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up" v.10
- "Since all these things are thus to be dissolved what sort of persons ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be kindled and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire" v.11.

The picture painted by these verses shows a planet perishing in a heat of unimaginable ferocity. There will be no light, no sky, but a profound darkness. Because of the intensity of the heat, the clouds that contain the moisture and dust that make possible light on Earth, will disappear with a roar fiercer than that of any forest fire the world has ever known. We should pay attention to the extremely vivid expressions that are used in these verses: 'Great noise'; the heavens 'kindled'; the heavens 'dissolved'; the earth 'burned up'; the elements 'melt'.

Where 'Global Warming', or the 'Depletion of the Ozone Layer', or 'the Greenhouse Effect' fit into this scenario - or if they fit in at all - I am not wise enough to be able to determine. But, because I believe God's Word, I do believe that in Peter's letter, our heavenly Father has given us a glimpse of the death of our sin-stained planet.

What Peter describes does not fit the theology of those people who call themselves 'Jehovah's Witnesses', and who hold the view that the existing Earth will always exist, after undergoing a sort of 'dry-cleaning' operation. We need to remind such people of what Peter's letter actually declares. It is impossible to dismiss such language by describing it as 'figurative' or 'symbolic'. The description must be taken literally. It is a statement of divinely revealed fact.

One day, what Peter describes will surely occur, and if we are wise we shall pay attention to his exhortation in verse 14. "Since you wait for these things, be zealous to be found in him without spot or blemish, and at peace".

Think about the last three words - 'and at peace' - because no child of God need fear the final destruction of our planet. God's people will all have been removed before it occurs. And, as Peter says, "We, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells." v.13.

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European Christian Workshop

31st August - 2nd September 2006

Report by Bob Eckman, Nottingham

I will be honest and admit to a little bit of scepticism when I first heard about the **European Christian Workshop** that was held at Lancaster University. I guess it was scepticism born of ignorance - ignorance of just who was "behind" it. Oh, I knew **Paul Halliday** and **Stephen Woodcock**, but I still had questions in my mind. Despite these feelings, I determined to go anyway. I'm glad that I did.

Before reporting on the Workshop, let me begin by giving credit to where credit is due. Paul and Stephen did an excellent job of putting together a first-class programme. The whole event was well organised, and all who attended the three days had nothing but praise for the speakers, the accommodation, and the total organisation behind it. It was obvious that a lot of thought and planning had gone into it, and almost nothing was overlooked. From the moment that you were met and given your information pack and room allocation, everything went very smoothly. I commend Stephen and Paul very highly for all their hard work.

Speakers

The line-up of speakers was of a very high quality. Three were from the USA (Dr. Evertt Huffard, Dr. Earl Lavender, and Mike Williams), four from Britain (Alastair Ferrie, John Griffiths, Mark Hill, and Trevor Williams), and one from Ireland (Tony Coffey). The topics covered a wide range from working with young people to working with an older generation, from studies in Ephesians and Colossians to studies in 1 Corinthians, and from evangelism in this country to understanding Islam and the impact it has had on our world. Every one of these subjects was dealt with in an expert way, and they were all well worth the time and expense in being present.

The "keynote" addresses were presented by Evertt Huffard who is Dean/Executive Director and Professor of Missiology at Harding University Graduate School of Religion. He gave some much-needed insights into the whole subject of Islam, dealing with *Facing Islam and Our Fears*, *The Rules of Engagement in a Christian-Muslim Encounter*, *What Muslims Struggle to Understand About Christianity*, and *What Christians Struggle to Understand About Islam*. Dr.

Huffard is well qualified to speak on the subject because of the extensive research that he has put into the subject, and also because he spent his development years as a young man growing up in Palestine and being educated at a Palestinian school. Not only were his lectures enlightening, but they were also faith-building.

Statistics

53 attended the Workshop at Lancaster University. These came from 25 congregations in nine countries (England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, Belgium, India, Guyana, and Trinidad & Tobago).

Was the attendance disappointing? In many ways it was because such a programme dealing with important subjects by well-qualified speakers deserved a much larger audience. As a people who have been spoiled in the past by getting "something for nothing", the cost of £89 per person for meals and accommodation probably seemed a bit steep. I can assure you that it wasn't. It was value for money, and this amount was only possible thanks to some generous sponsorship to help cover the costs. In other ways, though, the attendance wasn't disappointing, because this was a first. Perhaps others were like me - somewhat sceptical. If you were, and you let that put you off, you missed a real treat.

Everyone who attended was unanimous in the feeling that this shouldn't be a "one-off," never-to-be-repeated event. This needs to be followed up by another European Christian Workshop next year. And, if everyone has gone home and related to their congregations what they received during those three days - well, once the details of next year's Workshop is announced, you'd better get your booking in early, or you might be disappointed!

Again, my personal praise, admiration, and thanks to Paul and Stephen (and no doubt many others who worked quietly behind the scenes) for a job truly well done!

Baptism at Stretford again!!

Stretford, Manchester

The Lord has blessed us yet again. So do rejoice with us again for the baptism into Christ of Andrew Waters at Skelmersdale on Sunday, 3rd September 2006.

Brother Andrew has been studying the Bible for some time and has been discussing baptism with Sister Teresa (see last month's notice of Sister Teresa's baptism). She put him in touch with us and it soon became evident that out of love for the Lord he was eager to be baptized. Realising its significance he asked to be baptized as soon as possible.

We pray that he will be blest in his new life in Christ. We are grateful to the brethren at Skelmersdale for their kind hospitality.

Allan Ashurst, for Church in Stretford

Obituary Sir. Margaret Orr

Motherwell

The Church at Motherwell chronicles the death of sister Margaret Orr, who passed away on the 17th of September, 2006 at the age of 81. Sister Orr was baptised at our old Union Street building in 1943 and from that date strove to be a faithful disciple of her Master. She lived in Glasgow and for many years travelled back and forth by train to attend our Sunday morning breaking of bread meeting. Her warm and engaging personality will be greatly missed. We extend our sincere condolences to all her family. Brother Ian Davidson officiated at the funeral, which was held at Dalnottar Crematorium in Clydebank. The large gathering reflected how much she was loved and respected by all.

**William Purcell,
Secretary.**

Can anyone help?

I would like to run a series in the SS that traces the history of early Christianity from the time of the ministry of Jesus through to the Council of Nicea – approximately the first 300 years of Christianity. I would like this series to cover such things as:

- The influence of the Roman Empire;
- The influence of Judaism on early Christianity;
- The clash of Greek and Jewish cultures in the development of the Church;
- The diaspora and Hellenist Jews;
- The spread of Christianity;
- The Jerusalem Council;
- Peter's mission to the Jews;
- Paul's mission to the Gentiles;
- The Jewish – Roman conflicts and the effects of the fall of Jerusalem;
- Christian persecution;
- What happened after 100 AD?
- How the canon of scripture was formed;
- Other contemporary religions (inc Gnosticism);
- The merging of religious and secular authority in Rome;
- The Council of Nicea etc, etc.

I know that my own knowledge of many of these issues, which put the New Testament into its real context, has been very thin until recently and I believe there is a wonderful opportunity for someone to distil the key events of this vital part of our Christian her-

itage. Is there anyone who will take up the challenge (or knows someone who might)? If so please contact me to discuss further (contact details below). **Editor**

No responses yet – is anyone up for the challenge or aware of anyone who might be?

The Churches of Christ Salute you

The Church at Kentish Town is ordering a new edition of the popular booklet formerly known as "The Churches of Christ Salute You." It will be an A5 size booklet of 24 pages with a blue cover. There are a few small alterations to bring it up to date, such as renaming it "The Churches of Christ Greet You" and replacing the artwork.

If you would like a draft copy to examine please email me and I will send one.

As we are having a large quantity printed, the cost will be only £17.35/100 plus postage. The booklet is now at the printers and will be available shortly. Please send your order and payment to Derek Daniell, 34 North farm Road, Tunbridge Wells. TN4 9HH. Email: **dandm@daniellfam.freeseve.co.uk**

Rose M Payne, Treasurer.

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