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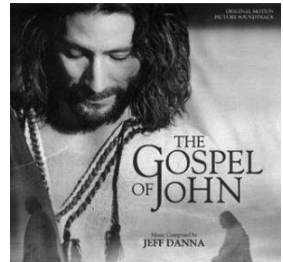
December, 2006

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

Understanding the Life of Jesus The healing of a man blind from birth.

(Robert Marsden, Wigan)

Over the past months we have been studying the significance of 'events' in the life of Jesus and looking at their historical significance in the context of the ongoing confrontations that Jesus had, in particular, with the Jewish religious authorities. This month's study, recorded in John Chapter 9 and dealing with the restoration of sight to a blind man, is one of the most dramatic pieces of dialogue in the whole of the New Testament.



In our last study we looked at the Jesus statement, "Before Abraham was, I am." The problem with this statement for the Jews was that to accept it would have given credibility to the claims of Jesus to be Son of God, and as a consequence they would have had no alternative but to worship him as such. They were not prepared to do this. The Pharisees are confronted with the same terrible dilemma with the miracle of the giving of sight to the man blind from birth. The factual evidence of the miracle is right before them, but to accept the evidence of the healing and the identity of the healer would mean recognition the miraculous powers of Jesus. But more of that shortly.

The light of the world.

It's clear from the early verses of Chapter 9 that the disciples still carried with them the Jewish tradition that the physical sickness or incapacity of an individual was the result of past sin. As the blind man in this case was a 'man blind from birth' it was impossible for his own sin to be the cause of his problem, so they rationalised that it must have been the sin of his parents that was passed down to him. Jesus quickly knocks both these ideas aside. It is important to note here

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that when Jesus says: **"It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him"**, Jesus does not infer that the man had been deliberately made blind so that a miracle could be performed. Rather the sense is that as the man was blind, an opportunity is presented for the works of God to be made known through him.

There is also a direct link in Jesus' following words to his testimony to the Pharisees in the Temple court a few days earlier when he said: **"I am the light of the world."** (John 8:12). Jesus is about to make public the most profound physical evidence of that divine, spiritual claim. Very shortly Jesus would deliver light to a man who had lived his entire life in darkness. His command over the physical world was evidence of His divine authority, a truth that the Pharisees realised but could not contemplate the consequences of.

Sight received

The manner of the healing itself is very significant. We learn in verse 14 that this act of healing took place on the Sabbath, itself an affront to the Pharisees whose command of every legal aspect of the Law was paramount. There is a marked simplicity about the actions of Jesus. He spat on the ground, made clay with the spittle, smeared it on the man's eyes and told him to wash in the Pool of Siloam. On doing this the man was given sight for the first time. So far as the Rabbis were concerned 'it was forbidden for any man to smear even one of his eyes with spittle on the Sabbath, except in cases of mortal danger' (Dean Farrar: The Life of Christ). In this instance, Jesus had not only smeared both the man's eyes but had also mingled the saliva to make clay. And all of this was on the Sabbath – effrontery indeed to the Pharisees, and yet another example of Jesus' determination to confront their legalistic and narrow-minded attitudes.

It is tempting to look in detail at the outstanding narrative that follows. Clearly the man was quite well known and the fact that he now had his sight seemed to cause consternation, amazement and disbelief in equal measure amongst his friends and acquaintances. What I want to reflect on are the simple statements of the chief witness in this incident – the healed man. Amongst the hiatus that followed his healing and the endless questions, the man makes a simple objective statement about what happened: **"The man called Jesus made clay and anointed my eyes and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash'; so I went and washed and received my sight."**

The Pharisees' response

The Pharisees, who were in council at the time, were the next to enter the furore. Their desperation to rationalise the events was based on this dilemma:

If they accepted that the healing had happened as described, they would have no alternative but to acknowledge the claims of Jesus;

If they didn't want to acknowledge Jesus (as of course they didn't), they had to somehow refute the healing that had taken place.

Everything in the legalistic, nit-picking, 'letter-of-the-law' approach of the Pharisees became channelled towards perpetuating their narrow view of the Sabbath and attempting to dismiss Jesus as a criminal or charlatan. The Pharisees repeatedly asked the healed man to describe the events, to whom he replied: "He (Jesus) put clay on my eyes, and I washed, and I see." They asked him what he thought about Jesus: "He is a prophet." What glorious simplicity and objectivity.

The Jews changed their line of attack and now brought the man's parents into the debate in the hope that they might be able to establish that their son had not, after all, been blind from birth. Again this proved unfruitful, because the parents confirmed that the man was their son and that he had been blind from birth. As to how he had received sight they simply said 'Ask him'. In their increasingly determined attempts to persuade people against the growing interest in the work of Jesus, the Jewish authorities had previously declared the 'cherem' (exclusion from the synagogue) on anyone who acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah. Apparently this was in the minds of the parents as they turned the Pharisees back towards their son to answer the Pharisees' questions. Unlike their son, who appears to be made of sterner stuff, they didn't directly acknowledge Jesus.

Under a second wave of questioning the healed remains resolute. Invited to give praise to God, because they knew that Jesus was a sinner, the man refers back to what he knows: **"...one thing I know, that though I was blind, now I see."** It was an a-political statement, a simple statement of fact, and all the more powerful for that. After the next round of repetitive questions about the days events, the healed man, apparently becoming very frustrated with the Pharisees, asks them a question that without doubt had them apoplectic with rage: **"Why do you want to hear it again? Do you too want to become his disciples?"** And then the healed man really warms to his theme and puts to the Pharisees, in an almost mocking way, the unsustainability of their own position, and delivers an eminently logical rationale of his: **"Why this is a marvel! You do not where he (Jesus) comes from and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if any one is a worshipper of God and does his will, God listens to him. Never since the world began has it been heard that any one opened the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, He could do nothing!"**

"Lord, I believe."

It is probably difficult to underestimate the effect of this on the Pharisees. They had started out, no doubt very confidently, to undermine this man's story. They finished having failed to make any dent at all in the integrity of the man's claims, and worse, had failed in a very public way. The 'stock' of Jesus amongst the people was no doubt enhanced, as the man would continue to tell of his healing. Indeed as Jesus later revealed himself as the Son of man and asked the healed man if he believed, the man simply said, **"Lord, I believe."**

This narrative ends where it started with themes of darkness and light. Jesus had claimed that he was the 'light of the world' and had physically justified that claim and through that physical act justified the spiritual emphasis of that claim. A man, blind from birth, could now see. With the Pharisees hanging around, no doubt monitoring the words and actions of Jesus, Jesus reveals something of his eternal purpose to his new follower: "For judgement I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind." It seems that the Pharisees recognise themselves in this statement and on the basis of their recognition of their failure to acknowledge Jesus, He confirms their continuing guilt.

In conclusion, two more things strike me from this remarkable passage of Scripture. Wouldn't it be wonderful if men and women had more of the simple, objective faith in Jesus and His purpose as that displayed by the healed man? He stood right outside of religious and political machinations. And wouldn't it be equally wonderful if we Christians were sometimes less 'pharisaic' in our approach to our Christianity and dwelt more on the pure, unalloyed grace and spiritual sight that is ours through our belief in God and our trust in His Son?



QUESTION: Is cremation wrong for a Christian?



A few weeks ago a very dear friend called me to inform me that Corby was in the national news of the day. The newspapers were reporting that Corby's local authorities are considering a newly-devised method of disposing of dead bodies, currently being used in at least one Scandinavian country.

The new procedure, said to be a viable alternative to cremation, involves *freezing* corpses so intensely that they are quickly dehydrated and reduced to a fine ash. It is claimed that this is more hygienic and more 'eco-friendly' than either traditional burial or cremation. The report also stated that the reason why the Corby Borough Council is investigating this process is because Corby is running out of ground for burials, and within a few years will have no space left.

Now remember, this new idea is only at the 'consideration' stage, and there is no guarantee that it will gain public acceptance, therefore we need say no more about it for the moment. But the mention of cremation raised again questions with which a great many Christians have struggled, and by which they have been troubled, namely:

- **"Where do Christians stand with regards to Cremation?"**
- **"Do the scriptures contain instruction about the treatment of the bodies of those who have died – our relatives and friends?"**

In other words, *"Is cremation wrong for a Christian?"*

Similar questions are usually asked with passages such as 1st Cor. 15 in mind. You will no doubt recall that *that* is the great chapter, which declares the glorious news of the resurrection and transformation of the believer's body.

In verse 35 Paul refers to a question being asked by some of the Corinthians, **"How are the dead raised?"** and in verse 52 he declares, **"...the dead shall be raised incorruptible"**, and later, in v.55; **"O grave, where is thy victory?"** So there is no doubt that he is thinking of burial. We must also consider the words of the Lord Jesus Himself, concerning His return. **"The hour is coming when all that are in the grave shall hear His voice and come forth, those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those that have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment"** (John 5:28).

The Question

The question now arises; does this mean that believers must be buried? Is cremation therefore ruled out for Christians?

Well, there is no doubt that cremation is a relatively new method of disposing of dead bodies. Nor can it be doubted that, in Roman times, the first Christians invariably buried their dead. In this they were following the Hebrew traditional practice that had endured for centuries, because the ancient people of God actually considered burial to be mandatory, on the basis of His words in Gen. 3:19, **"You are dust, and to dust you shall return"**.

Added to this must be the fact that they considered burial to be the appropriate, reverent manner in which to treat the bodies of their loved ones. Even though, throughout almost the entire period of Old Testament history, the Hebrews had no

clear belief in resurrection and eternal life, they nevertheless regarded burial to be a more appropriate manner in which to part with the physical remains of their loved ones, considered in contrast with the burning of corpses, which was the widespread practice of pagans who regarded death as final. The notable exceptions were such people as the Egyptians, who had some sort of belief in an existence after death, and who therefore sought to preserve the bodies of their dead, as is proved by the Pyramids and Tombs outside of Cairo.

But, read the fascinating account, in Gen. 23, of the great concern shown by Abraham, when he sought a resting place for the body of Sarah. (This, incidentally, is probably the oldest and most complete record of a sale and purchase transaction yet discovered.) And, I might also mention, that in the Old Testament scriptures there is only one account of Israelites burning the bodies of their people, and this is found in 1st Samuel chapter 31, and a reading of that chapter reveals that this happened in very unusual circumstances, with the bodies first being burned and the bones then buried.

The Witness of the Catacombs.

Some years ago Isobel and I were able to visit to Catacombs, in Rome, and I assure you that it is impossible to describe the feeling one has when walking along those narrow, underground corridors, between the rows of shelf-like recesses in the earthen walls in which the dead bodies of Christians had once lain. The very size of the Catacomb system is staggering, for these corridors exist on five levels, one below the other, and they are so extensive that one could very easily get lost in them. It is reliably claimed that, at one time, they contained the bodies of some 500,000 believers.

But, why were these underground corridors excavated? You may have heard it said that the Catacombs served as hiding-places for Christians in a time of persecution by pagan Rome, but that is far from being the true story. At a time when pagan Romans built funeral pyres and consigned the bodies of their dead to the flames because they believed they had ceased to exist, the Christians looked forward to the day when their dead would be raised and changed, at the return of Christ.

An inscription found on a monument to a dead pagan of that period reads, "*I was not. I was. I am not. I do not care*". But when the Catacombs were opened in 1856, very different message were revealed. The first is found near the entrance. It reads: "*Sophronia lives in peace*". Then, near the place where a dozen Popes were buried side by side, the same hand had written a second inscription. "*Sophronia lives in the Lord.*" And finally, deep in the Catacombs was the message; "*Dear Sophronia lives for ever in the Lord.*"

Indeed, so confident were those early Roman Christians that death is not the end, that our guide was able to show the small rooms, deep in the Catacombs, where Christians came to celebrate the Lord's Supper, because they believed that a spiritual bond united them with those who had gone before to be with their Lord. They were so convinced that the distance separating living saints from those who have died is so small that they did not speak of 'death'. "**Sophronia *lives***", is what those statements declare.

So what can we say about cremation?

I have already said that it is relatively new in our country. The practice was brought back to England in 1874 by Queen Victoria's surgeon, after having witnessing a cremation in Italy. But it was not immediately accepted by the general population. In fact, there was widespread opposition to it, and in was ten years later, in 1884, that

the controversy that it created actually came to a head.

That year, a rather odd Welsh doctor, William Price, cremated the body of his five months old son on a Welsh hillside, and was subsequently prosecuted for his action. Dr. Price was undoubtedly eccentric, because he regarded himself as the Arch Druid of a lost Welsh tribe, and had named his son 'Jesus Christ'! The doctor was eventually acquitted, and it was this verdict that virtually made cremation legal. The practice then gradually became socially acceptable as well-known public figures opted to be cremated at death, but it was only when the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, who died in 1944, and his immediate successor, Lord Lang, who also died the following year, both chose cremation, that it gained acceptance by the Anglican communion,

The Roman Catholic Church continued to disapprove of the practice, but changed its stance in 1962, when the Pope, John Paul 1st, declared it no longer illegal for Roman Catholics to be cremated, and the next step followed in 1966, when the Church of Rome announced that its priests were permitted to officiate at a Crematorium ceremony.

Today, it is claimed that over 70% of funerals involve cremation. There are many reasons why so many choose it. Some believe cremation to be more hygienic and more ecologically responsible than interment. Others choose it for financial reasons. Some because they are 'not religious', and therefore have no faith in a resurrection to future life. And some, like the Corby councillors, see the land available for burials rapidly being taken up.

But! Does it really matter to a Christian?

Must it be burial? I think not. I suggest that, ultimately, what we decide is a matter of perception, emotions or sentiment. I know of nothing in the Scriptures that legislates either way. In fact, in 1 Cor. 13, Paul makes this interesting statement: **"Though I give my body to be burned..."**, and the context suggests the surrendering of one's body as an act of one's faith.

Our God is Able!

After all, we believe that our God, the Creator Who formed *'the first Adam'* from the dust and Who raised *'the second Adam'* from the dead after three days, is quite capable of giving us a body as it pleases Him (see 1 Cor. 15:42-55).

Not all His children have received a reverent, respectful burial. Think of those who, for their faith, have been burnt at the stake, or, in the Roman Coliseum, were thrown to wild beasts, or fed by mad Nero to the lamprey in his fishponds. Think of the missionaries who, for their faith, have taken tremendous risks and even become the victims of cannibals. Think of Christians who have been blown apart in time of war or in accidents, or who have been lost at sea. Think of those who have died in natural disasters, whose bodies may never be found.

Do we think that such situations render our God helpless? *"Is anything too hard for YHVH?"* This was the God's own question put to Abraham, and it needs no answer!

What really matters when we die is not the manner of our death, or the manner of the disposal of our feeble and imperfect body, but the disposition of our soul. If we die in the Faith, our eternal destiny is assured. We shall not only **'receive a body like His glorious body'** (Phil. 3; 21), but also, **'we shall be like him, for we shall see Him as He is'** (1st John: 3:2). But, please, *do* read the next verse!

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How Much Is A Miracle?

Author Unknown

Tess was a precocious eight year old when she heard her Mom and Dad talking about her little brother, Andrew. All she knew was that he was very sick and they were completely out of money. They were moving to an apartment complex next month because Daddy didn't have the money for the doctor bills and their house. Only a very costly surgery could save Andrew now and it was looking like there was no one to loan them the money. She heard Daddy say to her tearful Mother with whispered desperation, "Only a miracle can save him now."

Tess went to her bedroom and pulled a glass jelly jar from its hiding place in the closet. She poured all of the change out on the floor and counted it carefully. Three times, even. The total had to be exactly perfect. No chance here for mistakes. Carefully placing the coins back in the jar and twisting on the cap, she slipped out the back door and made her way 6 blocks to Rexall's Drug Store with the big red Indian Chief sign above the door. She waited patiently for the pharmacist to give her some attention but he was too busy at this moment. Tess twisted her feet to make a scuffing noise. Nothing. She cleared her throat with the most disgusting sound she could muster. No good. Finally she took a quarter from her jar and banged it on the glass counter. That did it!

"And what do you want?" the pharmacist asked in an annoyed tone of voice. "I'm talking to my brother from Chicago whom I haven't seen in ages," he said without waiting for a reply to his question.

"Well, I want to talk to you about MY brother," Tess answered back in the same annoyed tone. "He's really, really sick... and I want to buy a miracle." "I beg your pardon?" asked the pharmacist.

"His name is Andrew, and he has something bad growing inside of his head, and my Daddy says only a miracle can save him now. So how much does a miracle cost?"

"We don't sell miracles here, little girl. I'm sorry but I can't help you," the pharmacist said, softening a little.

"Listen, I have the money to pay for it. If it isn't enough, I will get the rest. Just tell me how much it costs."

The pharmacist's brother was a well-dressed man. He stooped down and asked the little girl, "What kind of a miracle does your brother need?"

"I don't know," Tess replied with her eyes welling up. "I just know he's really sick and Mommy says he needs an operation. But, my Daddy can't pay for it, so I want to use my money."

"How much do you have?" asked the man from Chicago. "One dollar and eleven cents," Tess answered barely audibly. "And it's all the money I have, but I can get some more if I need to."

"Well, what a coincidence," smiled the man. "A dollar and eleven cents - the exact price of a miracle for little brothers." He took her money in one hand and with the other hand he grasped her mitten and said "Take me to where you live. I want to see your brother and meet your parents. Let's see if I have the kind of miracle you need."

That well dressed man was Dr. Carlton Armstrong, a surgeon, specializing in neuro-surgery. The operation was completed without charge. And it wasn't long until Andrew was home again and doing well. Mom and Dad were happily talking about the chain of events that had led them to this place. "That surgery," her Mom whispered, "was a real miracle. I wonder how much it would have cost?"

Tess smiled. She knew exactly how much a miracle cost... one dollar and eleven cents... plus the faith of a little child.

Grace Beatrice Partington: A personal tribute

It wouldn't be right to produce a 'formal' tribute to Beatrice Partington, because Beatrice Partington was *anything but* formal! She was 'down to earth', genuine and real to the core. Totally and completely humble and this gave us all the more reason to love her. It speaks volumes about Beatrice's character and personality that if she heard all the kind words and tributes... she would probably wonder what all the fuss was about.

Anyone who packed into Hindley chapel for Beatrice's funeral service on 3 January 2007, would have left with little doubt that she possessed these Christ-like qualities. Anyone who knew Beatrice would have been sure of the accuracy of John Morgan's words. John did a brilliant job of reflecting on her character and reminded us that, whilst we naturally mourn her passing, she is in paradise and free from the mental anguish caused by Alzheimer's disease.

John Partington spoke on behalf of the family. He told of his mum's early life, how society's attitudes had forced Beatrice's teenage mother into putting her up for adoption. Beatrice never knew her real mum, and this was certainly something which she remained aware of throughout her life. John summed her response to this saying that whilst it 'would make many bitter, it made mum better'. Beatrice married Philip when she was 19 years old and was happily married to him until he died aged 73, some 13 years ago. John recounted that when Philip and Beatrice owned a sweet shop in Hindley, whilst Philip gave fair but exact measurements of sweets, Beatrice's servings would be more than generous! Their children were often given sweets with clear instruction 'don't tell your dad!'. She would never spend her money on herself, and would simply say 'I don't need it' in answer to protests.

Grace Beatrice Partington lay in her bed at the Ladymead Nursing Home in Bolton in the final days of her life; the coming together of her children [Marjorie, John, Geoff, Kath and Barbara] and her grandchildren [Nigel, Mark, Helen, Chris, Russell, Jane, Shaun, Michael, Jason, Matthew and Gareth] clearly showed the love that we have for her.

In Shakespeare's famous eulogy of Julius Caesar, Mark Anthony proclaims, "The evil that men do lives after them, the good is oft interred with their bones." Whilst sounding good, nothing could actually be further from the truth! It's in our nature to write nice things about people who have passed away, even if they were of somewhat shady character! However, with Beatrice Partington I suspect that few would argue that she really was a fantastic person, a brilliant wife, mum, grandma and great grandma; she wore her faith on her sleeve and her whole character was to love others, until to the very end. Beatrice Partington lived 'Jesus first, others second and self last'. The thing that makes me cry as I write this about grandma and encourages me more than I can express, is that in her dying days she was able to say with such confidence: 'to Canaan's land I'm on my way'.

Understanding the Seasons of Life

Lesson 4 - The Season of Loss

(David Yasko, USA)

We continue the series on Growing in the Seasons of Life and this month we'll look at the Season of Loss. Life is full of losses and we will all go through seasons of tragedy, seasons of grief, where some kind of disaster will take away something or somebody that's very important to you. We can lose our finances, our jobs, our homes, our husbands, wives, health. And, one that reaches all of us, we'll all lose loved ones who die. You may not be in a season of loss today, but you're time is coming. So, this article is going to prepare us for the inevitable. We are going to look at five keys or steps on how to recover or respond to life's losses. But before we go into that we need to see some basic things about life. Probably the most important of which is that life is not fair. "And they lived happily ever after" doesn't apply to most of us. The Bible talks about it in Ecclesiastes 8:14: "**Sometimes something useless happens on earth. Bad things happen to good people, and good things happen to bad people.**" Have you ever seen this happen? Of course you have; this is life. And there are two truths we have to learn before we can even talk about how to recover from the season of loss.

First, we don't always get what we deserve.

We have this myth floating around that says, "All bad things happen because we're bad and all the good things that happen are because of our goodness." Neither one is true. The truth is, when good things happen to us it's called grace. When the bad things happen, it's called "life." We don't live in a perfect world. This is not heaven. Everything doesn't always go like we plan. And it's not always our fault. The fact is, there are times in life when we are going to be innocent victims and we will have losses that are unexplainable.

Second, not everything that happens is God's will.

We were all shocked recently by this lady who killed her baby and dumped her. And there probably are some pious people out there who are saying, "Well, it must have been God's will that the baby die." There is an old Hebrew term for that: Bologna. It's just not true. The Bible says God is not the author of evil, so don't blame God for all the bad things in the world. God could stop drive by shooters. It would be really easy. All he would have to do is take away their freedom to choose and they couldn't do it anymore. But if he did that, he'd have to take away your freedom to choose, as well. Now, we blame God for a lot. If you don't believe me, just read your homeowners insurance policy under the "acts of God" section. There are a lot of things in there, not one of them good. See, God has a will for your life, and you have a will for your life and often I choose to do my will instead of his will. That's how we get so messed up because when that happens, people get hurt. God won't force his will on us. The Bible says, "It's God's will that every person come to know

him, be baptized, and go to heaven.” And everybody isn’t going to heaven. Everybody doesn’t develop a personal relationship with God. Why? Because God’s will is not always done. You know when Jesus prayed in “The Lord’s Prayer:” “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” That’s because in heaven God’s will is done perfectly. I’m not going to explain all the personal losses, tragedies and disasters in life. I can’t. There are some things we are just not going to understand until we get to heaven. But I can give you some hope in the form of things we can do when the season of loss turns our world upside down.

HOW TO RESPOND TO LIFE’S LOSSES.

1. RELEASE MY GRIEF.

Tragedy always produces strong emotions. We get to know things like loss, fear, depression, anger, worry and guilt. And they’re scary because we don’t know what to do with them. You just got laid off, or somebody you love is suddenly taken away. And there are enormous feelings that come bubbling up from the inside. If we don’t deal with them now, it will take us far longer to recover from them. Or we believe the myth that says, “God wants me to walk around with a smile on my face all the time,” that we should never grieve, never hurt, never be sad. That it’s selfish to grieve over our losses. Well, Jesus taught the exact opposite. Matthew 5:4: **“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”** Would you write next to that, “It’s OK to grieve?” It’s OK to miss those who have been taken. Psalm 62:8: **“Pour out your hearts to God, for God is our refuge.”** Pouring our hearts out to God is just saying, “God I hurt, and this is a tough one to take.” And for a good example, just read the book of Psalms. David spends a lot of his time unburdening himself to God. Psalm 34:18: **“The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.”** So God is near.

2. RECEIVE FROM OTHERS.

This is tough, too. Galatians 6:2: **“Carry each other’s burdens...”** By helping each other with our troubles, we actually obey the law of Christ. But here’s the problem: we don’t like taking charity. It makes us look weak. So we’d rather retreat into a shell and withdraw from everything and everybody. And that is exactly the opposite of what we need. When we are in the season of loss, not only do we need the support of other people, we need the perspective of other people. When we’re in the season of loss, we don’t see the big picture and we need the help of other people who can see the big picture. In the season of loss, we need to let other people minister to us, and we need them dramatically. We need to let them comfort and help and sit with us. Why do you think the Church is so important to God? For this very reason. So we can care for each other.

Get involved in a midweek group. Get involved in a Sunday morning class. These are the people who are going to be there for you. Get involved now, before a crisis comes up so there can be some relational bridges built. I remember a family who visited a congregation for a couple of years. They never placed membership, they never got involved, never filled out a card so we could visit them, they never did anymore than show up for Sunday morning services and leave during the last song. The man got sick and had to go into the hospital. He asked me to come see him and I was out of town and couldn’t. So I called him in the hospital. I asked him if there

was a Sunday School teacher, if there was a Wednesday night teacher, if there was somebody he sat next to that he had taken the time to know who could come visit him. And even though they had been coming here for two years, they couldn't name a single person. He got out of the hospital and they never came back and they said, "this church doesn't care for us." And it was their fault. They had two years of opportunity to build any relationship they wanted to build, so that when the crisis inevitably came, there would be a support system in place. They just didn't do it. And they were the ones who lost. Hebrews 12:15: **"Look after each other so that not one of you will fail to find God's best blessings."** During the season of loss, we need God's people to help us.

3. REFUSE TO BE BITTER.

Job 21:25: **"Some people die in bitterness of soul, never having enjoyed anything good."** Now there is a contrast in that verse. We all have to decide if we're going to be bitter or be happy. We can't be both. When bitterness is in our heart, happiness walks out the door. And until we kick bitterness out, forget about being happy. They both can't live in the same house. In every situation we find ourselves in, we're going to have the choice of bitterness or happiness. And you can tell which one people choose to be.

Take the people who lost everything in the 911 attacks. The ones who refuse to live bitter lives said, "it's tough, but it's life. We've got to clean it up and put it back together. We've got what's left and we'll survive." The ones who refuse to live happy said, "Same old thing. I don't know why I bother. It'll never be the same again." It's all in the choice, isn't it? Please take this message. There is absolutely no correlation between our happiness and our circumstances. I've met people who, by our standards, have nothing. And I've seen them happy. And I've seen people who pretty much have never had anything major go wrong in their lives, and yet they constantly whine. They don't rise and shine, they rise and whine. Here's the truth: We are as happy as we want to be. And we can refuse to be bitter. Let's face it. Most of the world would love to have your problems. They would love to be in a position where they make enough money to pay your tax rate. They would love to be in a position to make a mortgage payment. They'd swap places with you in a New York minute. Let you sell nuts on the side of the road for a while and let them work in that air conditioned building and ride in that air-conditioned car. See, we can get so self-centred that we can forget just how good we've got it. So here's the antidote to bitterness:

Accept what cannot be changed. Job 11:13, 16: **"Devote your heart to God and stretch out your hands to him, and you will surely forget your trouble, recalling it only as waters gone by."** Have someone say that Serenity Prayer for you; the one that goes, give me the wisdom to change the things I can, not mess with the things I can't, and let me be smart enough to tell them apart.

Focus on what's left, not what's lost. 1 Thessalonians 5:18 **"...give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."** Everything around us is temporary with the exception of God; God is eternal and to believe that takes faith. Faith isn't denying reality. Faith is refusing to be discouraged in spite of the problem.

4. REMEMBER WHAT'S IMPORTANT.

When we go through the seasons of loss, we need to realize that the greatest things in life are not things. What really matters is people... our relationships. Luke 12:15: **"A man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."** So don't lose your joy over unimportant stuff. Look at 1 Timothy 6:7: **"For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it."** We know that's true. We can't take it with us. For real security, we have to build our lives on something that can't be taken from us. Can a job be taken from us? Yes it can. Nobody is unexpendable. Not me, not you. This is where our faith comes in. If one faucet gets turned off, God will turn on another one just as easy. Can we lose our health? Yes. Can you lose the person you're married to? Yes. Can we lose our youthful beauty? That's a definite yes. If we build our security on how we look, we've got a sad thing coming. We can't build our lives on something that's not going to last. And the only thing that's going to last is our relationship to God through his Son, Jesus.

5. RELY ON CHRIST.

This is the secret of strength in the losses of life. Paul writes in *Philippians 4:12-13*: **"I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength."** Notice that Paul didn't come to rely on Christ naturally. He had to learn it. Just like you and me. We're big in the self-reliance business. We listen to tapes and go to seminars to pump us up. Well, let me tell you something, all that stuff can only take us so far and when the season of loss pays us a visit, it just isn't good enough. We need CHRIST who strengthens me. The key to crisis control is Christ control. When Jesus is the Lord of the losses of our life, we'll make it. The acid test of our faith isn't done here in church. It's how we handle the losses and tragedies, and the unexplainable disasters of life. That's the acid test of our faith. Let me close with three suggestions that are going to help us rely on Christ when we come on one of those seasons that knocks us.

Lean on Christ for stability.

Our first need when it comes to a crisis, is stability. *Psalms 125:1*: **"Those who trust in the LORD are steady like Mount Zion, which cannot be shaken but endures forever."** *Isaiah 26:3*: **"You, Lord, give true peace to those who depend on you."**

Listen to Christ for direction.

The second greatest need in a season of loss is guidance. "What do I do now?" *Jeremiah 29:11*: **"For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, I have plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."** God's plan for our lives is a plan for hope. And we need his guidance and direction.

Look to Christ for salvation.

Did you know the literal definition for salvation is freedom? God can liberate us from the mud that has destroyed us by holding us down. *Psalms 46:2*: **"Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea."** No matter what happens, we cannot lose with God. That's a guarantee.

QUOTATIONS

(Ian S Davidson, Motherwell)

I read a lot. Right now, I am working my way through a book by Professor T.M. Devine entitled: *The Scottish Nation*. The book runs to almost seven hundred pages and is full of fascinating facts about the history of Scotland. As I read, I highlight statements or sentences that I find particularly interesting and important, as far as I'm concerned. For example, in the chapter *Religion and Society*, Devine says: "There is clear evidence, therefore, that in the era of industrialization and urbanization, religion remained a powerful force in the lives of the Scottish people, influencing values, providing a guide to personal conduct and helping to fashion contemporary social, welfare and educational policies, as well as moulding both imperial and national identities". Sadly, he cannot say that about Scotland in the year 2007.

Together with this book, I am working my way through, for the second time, *The Narrated Bible in Chronological Order* by F. LaGard Smith. It is already well-marked with black, green and red ink. I am highlighting stand-out passages; names and place-names; words and statements that refer to God's character; and all words that read: "...declares the Lord"; "The Lord has spoken"; "This what the Sovereign Lord says..."; "...says the Lord"; "The oracle that...the prophet received"; "Then the word of the Lord came to..."; etc. How I wish all Bibles were "red-letter" Bibles in which all of God's direct statements, including, of course, those of His Son, were written in bold, red type. I regard all my Bibles as tools and that is why my personal guidance notes and comments are penned all over them. Never be afraid to mark your Bible!

EXAMPLES

I keep index books of statements from all sorts of books I have read. I admit that most of the works I have studied are of a religious theme. Here are some statements taken at random:

- **"Astronomy hints at God's eternity, immensity and infinity."**
- **"Time is the realm in which things change."**
- **"The Jews were under a government of precepts; we are under a government of principles."**
- **"It was the destiny of the Jewish people to be different."**
- **"Wisdom uses knowledge with discretion, applying and appropriating it to high and holy purposes."**
- **"From Asia, religion, language and civilisation spread over the world."**
- **"The union of body, soul and spirit makes one man; the union and communion of Father, Son and Holy Spirit makes one God."**
- **"Human powers are physical, intellectual and moral."**
- **"Man learns best by demonstration."**
- **"It was not faith in the waters of Jordan that healed the leprosy of Naaman the Syrian; but immersing himself in it, according to the commandment."**
- **"Speech is imitation, not invention nor discovery."**
- **"It is in the nature of prohibitory law to kindle desire and incite to sin."**
- **"God has no holy places, holy days or holy things in the kingdom of heaven. He has only holy people."**
- **"Preaching is a manifestation of the Incarnate Word from the written word by the spoken word."**
- **"Faith implies reliance upon God and obedience to God."**
- **"More people today seem to desire the honour of an office than to be an honour to the office."**
- **"The cross is a frightful memento of man's hate, but an even greater monument to God's love."**
- **"Jesus has never been a head without a body, a king without a subject, a shepherd without a sheep, a vine without a branch, or a captain without a soldier, since His coronation and ascension."**

- **"The prophet performed a work, which was God to manwards; the priest performed a work, which was man to Godward. The first offered the gift of God to man; the second, the gifts of men to God."**
- **"There are values which are superior to individual rights."**
- **"Nature and revelation are co-witnesses of the same God."**
- **"To read without reflection is like eating without digesting."**
- **"Christ is not valued at all unless He is valued above all."**
- **"No pleasure is comparable to standing on the vantage ground of truth."**
- **"The door of truth never opens to the key of prejudice."**
- **"Christianity was not designed for a Christian world. It is a Divine strategy intended to probe and penetrate a pagan culture and to bring it into voluntary subjection to the Prince of peace."**
- **"God has revealed Himself in nature, in word and in a Son. In these three He has demonstrated His power, His purpose and His personality."**
- **"We must either receive the word of the Lord or reject the Lord of the word."**
- **"No promise, no hope."**
- **"Man unregenerate is ruined in body, soul and spirit – a frail and mortal creature."**
- **"A silent Christian is an anomaly in creation."**
- **"If there is no such thing as morality, there can be no such thing as immorality."**
- **"Of all people who ever lived, the Greeks were the greatest literary thieves, and had the best art of concealing theft."**
- **"There is a great deal more to Christianity than keeping people out of hell. It also involves keeping hell out of people."**
- **"Churches were not established that the gospel might be preached; the gospel was preached that churches might be established."**
- **"A moral law is not right simply because God commands it; but commands it because it is right."**
- **"Grace reached its apex in Jesus."**
- **"All empires that have fallen, all states and nations that have passed away, have perished through irreligion, immorality and vice."**
- **"Christianity is not Jesus pointing us to a book, but a book pointing us to Jesus."**
- **"To understand the Christian religion, we must study it; and to enjoy it, we must practise it."**
- **"Some people should be ashamed to live and afraid to die."**
- **"One is not a Christian because he lives a good moral life; but he lives a good moral life because he is a Christian."**

A FAVOURITE QUOTE

One of my favourite quotations of all time is from the pen of the outstanding gospel preacher – Walter Scott, who was a close friend of Alexander Campbell. The quote is taken from his book entitled: *The Messiahship*. It is found under the chapter heading: *The Incarnation*. He writes: "We conclude that if the greatest truth in the Old Testament is that man was made in the likeness of God; the greatest in the New is that God was made in the likeness of man." There is God and the Spirit of God, and there is man and the spirit of man. I also once noted this statement: "The spirit is that part of man which makes him able to reason and to think, and which makes him kin to God. It is through his spirit that man can receive a message from God, and can enter into fellowship with God who is Spirit."

John wrote: **"And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, (and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth"** (John 1:14). Paul wrote: **"...but made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross"** (Philippians 2: 7-8). Someone once made this comment: "He came from the other side. We had been without God, but now He had become 'God with us'". I like what Walter Scott went on to say in his book: "The incarnation is the greatest truth in history".

News and Information

Ghana Appeal

Donations to the Ghana Fund have not only saved lives through medical aid, but have helped our Ghanaian brethren to evangelise further and bring more people to Christ.

Among current needs are three expectant mothers in urgent need of antenatal attention, but the cost of this is beyond them. A brother with a heart defect is also unable to meet the cost of necessary treatment.

A sister who has worked tirelessly for the Lord, bringing many to Christ including her own family, is suffering severe disfigurement through an infection or disease. The colour photograph that we have received shows how horrific this is, and medical attention is urgently needed.

Donations have enabled many brethren to be cured of debilitating and fatal ailments, as well as contributing to the growth of the Lord's Church and we urgently ask for this to continue. The need is still there.

Those wishing to help in this work please make cheques payable to Dennyloanhead Church of Christ Ghana Fund and send to treasurer:

**Mrs. Janet Macdonald,
12 Charles Drive, Larbert, Falkirk,
Stirlingshire. FK5 3HB
Tel: 01324 562480**

The Historical Survey of Churches of Christ in the British Isles

Here is what one reader writes of this book: "It was about 40 years ago when I found the Church of Christ. Having come from a Church of England background, my grandfather being a Canon, it was important for me to know the history of the Lord's Church in order to reinforce my belief that it was the right church for me, and not just an American sect. Had this book been around in those days it would have quickly fulfilled my need. It supplies a comprehensive view of our history, plus some touching and inspiring accounts of the faith and struggles of brothers and sisters who lived in days gone by. It is a book to be kept, and recommended, for subsequent generations to explain who we are and what we believe." – SMW

This book is superbly presented and deserves to be bought and read - and at a cost of £9.77 including post and packing it is very affordable. May I urge you to make the long hours of research and writing truly worthwhile by obtaining a copy? They are available from:

Mrs Julia Clark, Pennine House,
Strachan, Banchory, Kincardineshire,
Scotland. AB31 6NL, or

Mr Frank Worgan, 11 Stanier Road,
Corby, Northants, England. NN17 1XP

Enclosing payment of £9.77 per copy with cheques payable to: "BRITISH BIBLE SCHOOL (BOOK FUND)"

Editor

Coming Events

Saturday Evening Meetings at Stretford.

To be held in the Green Hut,
538 Kings Road, Stretford, Manchester.

Each meeting will start at 7.00 pm and
will consist of:

A Gospel Topic, followed by
Light refreshments, concluding with
Open Discussion.

Dates and speakers:

21st April 2007
John Morgan, Hindley
22nd September 2007
Mark Hill, Loughborough
20th October 2007
Ernest Makin, Wigan.

EUROPEAN CHRISTIAN WORKSHOP

**Thursday 30th August to Saturday
1st September 2007**

We are pleased to announce that we
will be holding our Second European
Christian Workshop at Lancaster
University.

The Theme will be:
*Growing Strong Hearts
And
Strong Churches*

Last year we had 53 people from 11
countries and they enjoyed the
experience.

DON'T MISS OUT!!

The speakers that have been
confirmed so far are:

*John Mooney (UK),
Vince O'Donovan (UK),
Jason Sneathen (UK),
Alexander Malirrytos (Greece),
Randy Lowery (USA),
Terry Briley (USA).*

We are also planning to hold
Ladies' Classes as well.

**Early Bird Offer: The fee will be
£95 if you book before 30th April.**
After this the fee will be £105.

If you want further information then
please contact:
Stephen Woodcock – (01942) 211479
Or E-mail:
stephen.woodcock@hotmail.co.uk

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