

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"

BE INSPIRED... and stay the course!

The record that we have available to us of the workings of God and the unfolding majesty of the redemptive plan, culminating in the victory over sin and death secured by Jesus, is truly a remarkable work. In many respects the Bible is a salutary work for mankind because it records the consistent failure of mankind to successfully meet the challenges of God. The history of mankind's relationship with God is littered with failure to adequately respond to God's bidding, disobedience and rebellion towards God and impatience with God, as His plan for us was unfolded on his terms rather than ours. So far and so quickly did mankind move away from God that He had to take severe and drastic action to rescue the situation. Even the humble nation chosen to be the medium through which God would outwork his plan, and to whom God spoke and offered support continuously, could not stay the course faithfully.

When His Son came into the world, He was rejected by his own people and even those who were closest to him failed at times to understand the real terms and purpose of his mission. His nearest and dearest disciples slept as Jesus prepared himself for the ultimate sacrifice of love, and in the immediate hours before his death, Peter who had so resolutely told Jesus that he was prepared to die for him, actually denied that he ever knew him. Even after Jesus had been raised from the dead and this astonishing fact was preached abroad there were those who believed but were then again seduced by the old way of life and failed to stay the course.

And today? Just as they have for the last 2000 years men and women largely ignore, dismiss or reject Jesus. Yes and even we his followers let him down more often than we ought to. So where then is the inspiration in this catalogue of failure?

The inspiration of course is in the nature of God Himself. Because God is consistent and faithful to us; He did ensure that the ultimate penalty was paid to win our salvation; even today his offer of forgiveness remains open to all who are willing to repent of past failures and seek the grace and redemption that God, in Jesus, has made available to us. Because our faith is not in ourselves, nor in other people, nor in the seductive materialism of the present world, but in God, we have a blessed assurance in the eternal promises that have been revealed to us. "...straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus... Only let us hold true to what we have attained."

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THE SEVEN LETTERS TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES (1)

(Ian S. Davidson, Motherwell)



The book of Revelation is a remarkable work. It is a book of prophecy. (1:3; 21:19) I know many saints who have never really studied it because they find it too difficult to understand. Granted, it is a book of signs and symbols, but these should not deter us from digesting its contents and trying to work out their meaning and significance. The effort to interpret it will prove worthwhile. Personally, the book contains some of my favourite verses in the Bible and, indeed, chapter 12 is one of my favourite chapters in the Scriptures. I love all of the Bible – including Revelation! I know it is a different sort of book from all the rest in the New Testament canon, but that makes it all the more interesting. Without

the book of Revelation the New Testament Scriptures would be as incomplete as the Old Testament Scriptures without Genesis.

Revelation (written by the apostle John probably sometime in the mid-90's A.D.) was not written to frighten people, but to encourage them. The early saints faced great persecution. G.R. Beasley-Murray has written: "The book reflects the beginning of a storm of persecution soon to burst in full fury on the Christians of Asia and ultimately on the Church everywhere." William Hendriksen has commented: "In the main, the purpose of the book of Revelation is to comfort the militant Church in its struggle against the forces of evil." Robert Wallace Orr has said: "The Revelation was given to its first readers to strengthen them for faithfulness and victory in their own time...The great theme of Revelation is the victory of the Lamb of God." I too see in this great work the temple of truth crowned with the dome of victory. Indeed, I like the title of Orr's commentary – *Victory Pageant*.

ASIA

Chapters 2 & 3 of Revelation feature letters addressed to messengers (earthly) of seven churches sited in the Roman province of Asia. We now know this part of the world as western Turkey. We read in chapter 1: "**I (John) was in the Spirit on the Lord's day and heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet, saying, I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last: and, what you see write in a book, and send it unto the seven churches which are in Asia: unto Ephesus, and unto Smyrna, and unto Pergamum, and unto Thyatira, and unto Sardis, and unto Philadelphia, and unto Laodicea.**" (10,11) These were the seven golden lamp stands (12, 13, 20) of Asia.

Asia was the Roman province, which occupied the western part of Anatolia and included the former territories of Caria, Ionia and Lydia. At one time western Anatolia was on the fringes of the Hittite Empire. Then it became subject to Greek settlement. Later, the Persians, under Cyrus, captured Sardis and much of Ionia (mid-6th century

B.C.). The Persians, in turn, were defeated by Alexander the Great. After his death, there was a hard-fought struggle for control of Asia Minor. Eventually, the last of the Pergamene kings bequeathed his kingdom to the Romans in 133 B.C. It became the province of Asia. In 88 B.C. Mithradates, the king of Pontus in northern Anatolia, rebelled and ordered the killing of 80,000 Italian residents in Asia. Sulla (88-85 B.C.) and Lucullus and Pompey (74-63 B.C.) were sent to subdue him. A thorough re-building programme followed under Augustus.

SIR WILLIAM RAMSAY

Sir William Mitchell Ramsay (1851-1939) must be highlighted here. He was a classical scholar and archaeologist and, of his day, the foremost authority on the topography, antiquities and history of Asia Minor in ancient times. When he first set foot in Turkey in 1880, he was sceptic as far as the Biblical record was concerned. But things changed as a result of his thorough research in the field. His view of the New Testament record shifted from "unreliable" to "essentially trustworthy". I once asked the late Professor F.F. Bruce what to him were the most important findings in Biblical archaeology in the last hundred years or so. The contributions of Professor Ramsay were not overlooked.

THE SEVEN LETTERS

It is interesting to note that the letters number seven – a number of completeness or perfection to the Jews. Every type of congregation is found in the letters. In fact, I am of the view that any saint today can see his or her congregation within them.

All of the letters have things in common. First, there is the order to write. Second, each has a picture of Jesus. Third, each is informed: "I know your works". Fourth, there is a description of the condition of the congregation. Fifth, there is a promise to all those who persevere. Sixth, there is the command to hear what the Spirit says. Ephesus was the *forgetful* congregation; Smyrna, the *suffering* congregation; Pergamum, the *false* congregation; Thyatira, the *immoral* congregation; Sardis, the *dead* congregation; Philadelphia, the *faithful* congregation; and Laodicea, the *lukewarm* congregation.

Churches or congregations of Christ are of great importance. The good Lord did not establish Bible schools, colleges or universities, but congregations. One of the pictures we have of Jesus in the Revelation is of His standing in the midst of the seven golden lamp stands or churches. (1:12-16) I believe that every church of Christ is a school of Christ. Here is where all saints should grow in knowledge and understanding and wisdom. To teach or train the saints anywhere else is to teach and train them in man-made institutions. Congregations exist so we can all grow together and encourage one another in the faith. We cannot enjoy fellowship if we are separated!

I think it is easier to serve God in some congregations than in others. But wherever we are, we have to remain faithful. I like the fact that in each of the letters the final words are addressed to the individual. For example, we read: "To *him* who overcomes..." In other words, a Christian can be in a forgetful, a lukewarm or even a dead church, but still be faithful to the Lord. On the last day, we shall not be judged as congregations, but as individuals. Let it be emphasised: "**He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the Churches.**"

One Oversight In Each City

(Allan Ashurst, Manchester)

Much distress and disruption is being caused by some church of Christ missionaries who insist that every municipality should have only one church with elders over several flocks throughout the municipality. In other words they are saying that there can be several groups meeting in different parts of a town or city, but they must all be under one centralised oversight. This is saying that the way the Lord's Church is organised is governed by secular municipal boundaries. In the UK it would mean that London should have only one church. Wigan should only have one church etc. but there can be several groups meeting in London or Wigan but they must be under one centralised oversight. This kind of false teaching has caused much disruption and distress in several places.

In one country men have been sent away for indoctrination and on their return have set up a centralised body, registered it with their Government and named several churches of Christ as members of that body. Those who objected were threatened with being reported to their government as being de-registered. In another country a missionary is trying to persuade the churches in one of its cities to submit to the control of a centralised oversight.

The passage they misuse to justify their actions is Acts chapter 2 verse 46 where after the day of Pentecost the new Church broke bread from house to house. The rest of the sentence is ignored ("they ate their food with glad... hearts") which clearly shows that it refers to how Jerusalem residents shared their meals with Christians who were in need and not to the Lord's supper.

Acts 2:44 "And all that believed were together, and had all things common; 45 And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, **as every man had need.** 46 And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and **breaking bread from house to house**, did **eat their food** with gladness and singleness of heart,..."

After Pentecost the new Church in Jerusalem was under the apostles. It would take time for the apostles to organise them into congregations with elders. That came later. So Acts 2:44 is not a precedent for city churches.

The promotion of "a City Elder position over several flocks" situation is bad news. It advocates something that has no scriptural authority and which would be ideal for a Diotrephes type control situation.

3 John 1:9 "I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loves to have the pre-eminence among them, receives us not."

The man of sin spirit (2 Thessalonians 2:3) started in the early Church with one man being a bishop over elders in each congregation. This then became the metropolitan bishop controlling each political boundary. Then it became archbishops over each country. Then it progressed to bishops over each empire vying with each other for the position of universal bishop. As Paul said in 2nd Thessalonians chapter 2:

2 Thess 2:3ff "Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; 4 Who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sits in the temple of God, shows himself that he is God. 5 Remember ye not, that, when I was yet with you, I told you these things? 6 And now ye know what withholds that he might be revealed in his time. 7 For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now hinders will hinder until he is taken out of the way. 8 And then shall that Wicked be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming: 9 Even him, whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders, 10 And with all deceit of unrighteousness in them that perish; because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved. 11 And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie:"

The Satanic spirit of centralisation, even at the level of one man in control of a congregation must be resisted at all costs.

In the early Church they were to have several elders in each congregation. (Acts 14:23) The next step above them was the Lord Jesus as head of his universal Church. There was nothing in-between. The idea of setting up organisations according to the political/municipal boundaries of the time is ridiculous and fraught with danger, harming the sheep.

1 Peter 5:1 "The elders who are amongst you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: 2 Feed the flock of God which is amongst you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; 3 Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being examples to the flock. 4 And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fades not away."

These elders were to shepherd their own flock not be over several flocks.

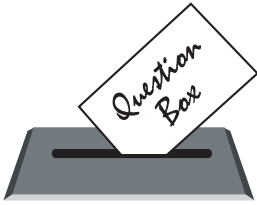
Acts 20:17. "And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus, and called **the elders of the church**. ... 28 Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all **the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost has made you overseers**, to feed the Church of God, which he has purchased with his own blood."

1 Peter 5:1 "The elders which are **among you** I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: 2 Feed the flock of God **which is among you.**"

The elders were **within** the congregations that they had to feed.

Brethren, be on the alert. Beware of control freaks and "earnestly contend for the faith which was once for all time delivered to the saints".

Acts 20:29. "For I know this, that after my departing grievous wolves will enter in among you, not sparing the flock. 30. Also of your own selves will men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them."



In last month's issue of the 'S.S.' I promised that I would next consider the question concerning the length of time the body of Jesus lay in the tomb – a question prompted by the words of the Lord Himself in Matt.12:40, where we read:

"As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth".

Expressed simply, the question asks:

"Was the body of Jesus really in the grave for three days and nights?"

Well, if we are looking for the chronological accuracy of which our modern world is proud, with its time-pieces which, for an age that is virtually controlled by the clock, make it possible to calculate time down to parts of a second, I think we shall be disappointed.

A Principle of Interpretation

Here is a fact that should always be borne in mind when attempting to determine the meaning of biblical words and phrases. Words are like tokens or counters. They have no intrinsic value; that is, no value in themselves. They depend on the meaning that is attached to them by the people using them. The question that we, today, must ask is:

'What did that word –or that expression – mean to the people who used it at that time?'

In the case of the words we are studying this month, the Jewish rulers who heard Jesus make this statement, revealed what *they* understood it to mean, when they went to Pilate the Roman Governor, to request that a guard be placed at the tomb of Jesus. They said, **"We remember that that deceiver said while he was yet alive, 'After three days I will rise again'. Command therefore that the sepulchre be made sure until the third day..."** (Matt. 27: 63-64)

I suggest that an understanding of this principle of interpretation will help us to understand both Matt. 12:40 and many other puzzling passages.

The reckoning of Time

In 1988, Professor Stephen Hawking gained worldwide celebrity when he produced his book 'A Brief History of Time', and man's fascination with time-keeping never diminishes. But in the New Testament Age, the reckoning of time was a relative calculation, and people of that age would probably never even have asked the question which we are now considering, not only because they did not possess the technology that we now possess, but because they were simply not as concerned as we are today, with measuring life in days and hours, minutes and seconds.

In fact, among the Jews in the days of the Lord Jesus, for legal purposes, it was not necessary for a 'day' to run the full number of hours, in order to be considered a 'day'. Any *part* of a 'day' was calculated as a 'day', even if only *one hour* had passed! Commenting on the words of Jesus in Matt. 12; 40, where the Lord mentions Jonah's terrifying experience, the highly regarded and scholarly Bishop Lightfoot, in his work, "*Horae Hebraicae*", mentions a Jewish saying which states that, "A day and a night make an Onah, and a part of an Onah is as the whole".

I suppose that, in an age of radio-controlled clocks, quartz and digital watches and chronometers, many would find this old Jewish saying very unsatisfactory. But Lightfoot also makes the comment: "Therefore Christ may truly be said to have been

in the grave three Onoth, the consent of the schools and the dialect of the nation agreeing thereunto”.

Do you think this Jewish practice strange? But Sir Robert Anderson, K.C.B. LL.D, who, besides being a biblical scholar, was also a highly respected legal authority says, concerning the phrase *‘three days and three nights’*,

“A prison chaplain would have no difficulty explaining this to his congregation. Our civil day begins at midnight, and the law reckons any part of a day as a day. Therefore, while a sentence of three days means three days of twenty four hours, equal to seventy-two hours, a prisoner under such a committal is seldom more than forty hours in gaol, and I have known cases where the period was only thirty-three hours. And this mode of reckoning was as familiar to the Jew as it is to our criminal courts

Old Testament Examples

You will also find this rather imprecise way of expressing time in the Old Testament. Consider the following examples.

- 1st. 1st Sam.30: 11-12 records that David’s men found an Egyptian and brought him to their commander. The man had been left behind by the fleeing Amalekites. We read that David gave him food and water, because he had not eaten nor drunk *‘three days and three nights.’* That simply meant, *‘for some time’*. In verse 12 the man says that he became sick *‘three days ago’*. Commentators claim that the two statements are intended to point out the considerable start the Amalekites had in their flight, and to stress that there was no time to lose if David was to catch up with them.
- 2nd. In 2nd Chron, ch.10, we read that when Rehoboam, the son of Solomon, became Israel’s new king, certain of his subjects approached him, pleading that they might be relieved of the heavy burdens which his father, in his later days, had imposed on them in order to support his extravagant life-style. Rehoboam said to them, *“Come again to me after three days”* (v.5). We then read in verse 12, *“So Jeroboam and the people came to Rehoboam on the third day.”* ‘On’ is not ‘after’! Yet Rehoboam did not rebuke them, or send them away, because they had come too soon.
- 3rd. In Esther 4:16, when Haman the enemy of the Jews plotted their wholesale destruction, Esther the Queen, issued this command. *“Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day”*. The fast was as binding upon Esther herself as upon the people. But chapter 5:1, then tells us, *“Now it came to pass on the third day, that Esther appeared before the king and said to him. “If it seems good to the king, let the king and Haman come this day unto the banquet that I have prepared for him”*.

It is obvious, then, that in Bible times, the phrase *“three days and nights”* did not mean what we understand it to mean today and that it was not, in those days, considered necessary to be as precise in recording time as it is now.

But, as I pointed out last month, the early Christians knew nothing of an *annual* celebration of the Lord’s death, burial and resurrection, because, as Paul told the Corinthian Christians, each first day of the week, when they celebrated the Lord’s Supper (1st Cor.11.26), they *‘proclaimed the Lord’s death’*, and would continue to do so *‘until He comes’*.

Indeed, the issue of an annual celebration was not even raised until long after the

establishment of the New Testament Church. It was towards the end of the 2nd century, by which time the predicted 'falling away' from the faith had already begun, that disputes arose concerning the '*time to celebrate Easter*': (read again last month's 'Question Box' answer). The problem arose again 325 A.D. at the time of the first Council of Nicea, when the Church of Rome attempted to resolve it, but it was not until more than 300 years later, in 664 A.D. at the 'Synod of Whitby', that churches in Britain decided to adopt the practices of the Roman Church. This means that the present-day celebration of 'Easter' is the invention of the Church of Rome.

The New Testament Evidence

In any case, it is surprising that, when the length of time the Lord's body lay in the grave is discussed, it is just the one sentence in which He uses the illustration involving Jonah which receives attention. What we ought to consider are the following facts:

1. The four Gospels reveal that, repeatedly, the Lord Himself declared in unequivocal terms, that He would be put to death and would rise from the dead '*on the third day*'.
2. He first predicted His resurrection early as John 2:19, in a statement which John admits His disciples only later understood, but later He began to speak about it openly, after Peter had declared Him to be the Christ, the Son of the living God, in Matt.16: 2. Similar statements are recorded in Matt. 17:23, 20:19, 26:44; Mark 9: 31, 10:34; Luke 9:22, 13:32, 18:33, 24:7, 24:21, 24:46, etc.
3. What Jesus said was evidently accepted without question by both His apostles and the members of the early Church, all of whom subsequently believed that what He had predicted had actually come to pass. Paul states this in 1st Cor.15:4, "*raised on the third day*". The New Testament contains nothing to suggest that the Lord made a prediction that failed.
4. Matt. 27; 63-64, tells us that, after the burial of the body of Jesus, the leaders of the Jews came to Pilate with a request. They said, "*We remember that that deceiver said, while he was yet alive, 'After three days I will rise again'. Command therefore that the sepulchre be made secure until the third day*".
5. On the morning of the third day, the women came to the tomb, and Luke 24: 5-8 records that the heavenly messengers who met them even quoted the Lord's own words. "*The Son of Man must be delivered...and be crucified and the third day rise again. And the women remembered His words.....and told all these things to the eleven.*" Matt.28:6 says that one of the angels told the women: '*He is not here, for He is raised, even as He said. Come; see the place where the Lord lay*'.

Dr. John Brown of Haddington, the Scottish minister who produced the Bible version which bear his name, also undertook to prepare a '*Harmony of the Gospels*.' One day, a visitor came to the house asking to see the great man, and Dr. Brown's canny old servant informed the visitor, rather scornfully, that his master was busy '*trying to reconcile four men who never disagreed!*' It seems that we ourselves, are sometimes inclined to undertake similar pointless tasks. Which is the more important: to be able to prove that the Lord's body lay in the grave for precisely three days and three nights? Or to be assured by all who truly knew Him, that He rose from the dead '*on the third day, even as He said?*'

Frank Worgan, 11, Stanier Road, Corby, Northants. NN17 1XP
Email. Frank@fworgan0.talktalk.co.uk

WONDERFUL WOMAN

Women of the Bible 10

Ann Boland, Germany

Sometimes we read more of seemingly unimportant women in the Bible than those who play, or should play, important roles. One of these women is Abigail. We first meet her in **I Samuel 25**. At this time, David was still on the run from Saul, and had moved into the Desert of Maon. He had his men with him, and, as the saying goes, "An army marches on its stomach", he needed supplies. We read that Nabal was a very wealthy man in this area, who was married to Abigail (**v 3**). She is described as being "*intelligent and beautiful*", unlike her husband "*surlly and mean in his dealings*" (**v 3**).

David heard that Nabal was shearing sheep, and sent to ask for provisions from him. David obviously didn't know Nabal, as he would then have realized what a fruitless task it was to get provisions. In verses 10 and 11, we read that Nabal said he didn't know David. This is interesting – either he really didn't know him or he did, but didn't want to help. A map of Israel of those times shows us where David had his stronghold in En Gedi (**I Samuel 23 v 29**), which is just east of Hebron. The Scriptures we are referring to here tells us David "*went down into the Desert of Maon*" (**I Samuel 25 v 1**). It could be that Nabal was telling the truth, and that the affairs of King Saul were unknown in these regions. On the other hand, his wife certainly knew who David was, as we can see in **verses 26 to 31**. She knew that if she didn't do anything, David would take his revenge on her husband. She therefore ordered that food was to be prepared, and to be taken to David; **v 18** gives us an idea of what David needed.

Abigail was not content just to send the food with the servants. She herself went to see David to beg mercy. She persuaded David that her husband was a fool (**v 25**). Her words are very interesting, as she acknowledges that David " *fights the Lord's battles*". (**v 28**) She also "*predicts*" that David would be "*leader over Israel*". (**v 30**) You could see this as a woman trying to save her people from being killed, or you could see Abigail as a woman astute enough to read the current events, and to see who would be king. David did not take revenge on Nabal, but when Abigail told her husband "*his heart failed him and he became like a stone*". (**v 37**) After his death ten days later, David proposed marriage to Abigail, which she accepted.

A very short story, but there is a lot to learn here.

- think before refusing help to others, it may be that there are consequences; Nabal's refusal nearly earned the death of all the males in his household;
- Actions show more than speech in many cases. The saying "Do as I say not as I do" has much truth in it. We should be very careful of not matching our actions by our words.;
- Have the courage to do right. Abigail was probably terrified of meeting David, as she knew that he was a fighter, and had enough men to destroy the household. She grasped the nettle, and went to plead her case to David.

Abigail's actions won David's respect, and a position as his wife. She was strong and generous. We can do the same today, and be rewarded, as in Abigail's case.

De Tails

Randy Milam, USA

While sipping a steaming cup of coffee early one morning and watching as a new day tried to muster enough energy to parade past our front window, my eyes were drawn to the image of a rather small, furry creature hopping across the street.

This little guy appeared to be in a hurry to get somewhere, if only to the other side of the road. What grabbed my attention was the fact that he was "hopping" in a flat-footed manner totally unnatural for a gray squirrel — something had detached him from most of his tail! He had only a short, raggedy "stub" left.

Now squirrels, like cats, depend on their tails to provide balance while they pursue their daily routine of tree climbing, wire walking and nut gathering. Squirrels and cats alike course through the treetops and walk fence tops by using their tails as a counter balance. My little tailless friend was cruising the yards and trees in the only manner he could...a flat-footed, unbalanced hop!

The sun, moon and stars all obey his commands. They are his own great alarm clock.

My mind drifted, as it so often does, to marvel at the laws of nature. One has only to consider the stage of nature for a short time to conclude that the Lord is fully in charge of all natural events and the creatures that star in the featured roles!

The sun, moon and stars all obey his commands. They are his own great alarm clock and the wind and tide come and go as he bids. The wolf howls and the eagle soars as he desires. Even the lightning, majestic as it is, flashes across the landscape on a stormy night at his direction.

As the events of the Old Testament were occurring and being chronicled, the Laws of Nature had already been written — all of them! Look closely at the first chapter of Genesis. Have you ever really considered the deeper meanings of those few verses used to record the formation of the entire universe and all that is in it — **as well as all the natural laws that make it work???** Events of such proportions could not be orchestrated by any other power than the Almighty God, Himself!!!

But creating them was not enough!!! Each event in the creation process was simply that, only a creation. Without codes, or "natural laws," to direct them, none of the items of his creation could perform the roles he'd planned for them.

The wolf howls and the eagle soars as he desires. Even the lightning, majestic as it is, flashes across the landscape on a stormy night at his direction.

Gen. 1:2 tells us that... "The earth was without form and **void** and darkness was on the face of the deep." That was after he'd actually began working on his creations as recorded in verse 1. In other words, there was substance there but existing in total darkness ('light' had not been created at that point) and the substance that

was present could not perform any function because none had been given it, nor the instructions on how to perform — all was '**void**' because natural laws had not yet been written!

Gen. 1:3-5 and verse 14ff chronicle the creation of light and its instruments — as well as the natural laws to govern their function. Light, as we know and understand it now, is only one small part of what the scientific community calls the 'radio spectrum,' as are the radio waves that allow us to transmit audio and visual messages over great distances through the air.

These same verses indicate that God not only created the elements of light and the radio spectrum, he also 'wrote' the laws which cause them to work in specific, coordinated and predictable manner. These 'codes' also determine **the functions of time**, (as we know it in the form of years, hours and minutes, etc.) through the movement of the sun, moon and stars, and the control of the seasons.

We further learn in verses 20 through 25, that He not only created animal life and plant life, but that He also wrote the natural laws that govern their performance and allow them to bring forth fruit... **"after their own kind"** — known to us as the sciences of agriculture and animal husbandry. If not for such "Laws," cows could give birth to trees and rocks could produce horses, etc.

In short, these few short verses in Genesis give us all the indication we need that all laws of Nature and Physics were written by God while he was yet fashioning the physical parts of his Creation.

The scientific community still struggles with many of these laws. Modern scientists struggle with defending older scientific "positions" which their own findings show to be flawed. They often find themselves in indefensible situations caused by tampering with or otherwise ignoring the natural laws of God!

The great truth is simply this: When one of the Laws of Nature is broken, something else very unnatural is the result!!! Laws, whether of God or man, cannot be broken without consequences. When God's natural laws are ignored, you can expect 'unnatural' results.

God, himself, used this principle when he sent his only son to Earth to atone for the sins of the world. Fortunately for us, by altering his own natural laws, the consequences provided us with an opportunity for Eternal Life!!! When sin entered the world through the indiscretion of Adam and Eve, it became necessary for a saviour to come and restore mankind to its proper place in the presence of God.

Jesus could not have been born through the natural course of events. It was **necessary** for him to be **"born of a virgin"** as the angels announced in the scriptures — a most-unnatural birth!

A **normal death** for the Saviour could not have atoned for the sins of the world. The propitiation for mankind required a **blood sacrifice**, as sacrifices under the old law had required. It could not have been done any other way.

Death by crucifixion was a most-unnatural death!!! It was the most horrible way to die that man could devise and was normally reserved for the worst of criminals. The unnatural stresses placed upon the pulmonary and respiratory systems of the body induced horrendous amounts of agony. While the cross caused no death-inducing wounds, death normally occurred in a few short hours.

As seen by the unnatural hop of my little "de-tailed" squirrel friend, God's Natural Laws cannot be altered without causing unnatural results.

Following his unnatural birth and a similarly unnatural death, it only remained then for the Saviour to conquer death in a way never before done and then to ascend into Heaven to complete his mission to provide a means of return to the Father for all mankind.

As seen by the unnatural hop of my little "de-tailed" squirrel friend, God's Natural Laws cannot be altered without causing unnatural results. The birth and death of Jesus, as well as his resurrection and ascension into Heaven, **all "unnatural" events**, forever altered the course of history. Fortunately for you and for me, they did!!! Otherwise, there would still be no atonement for our sins — there still would be no way for us to obtain **eternal life**!!!

(Bro. Randy Milam is the father of Lynette Milam who visited a number of congregations in the UK during a visit with a group from Harding University some 4 years ago. Lynette stayed with our family during her time in Wigan and mentioned that her father liked to write. Randy has worked as a journalist and has agreed to have some of his spiritual writings published in the SS – Editor)

Understanding the Life of Jesus *Jesus' conversation with woman at* *well of Sychar*

(Robert Marsden, Wigan)



This series of articles, based on events in the life of Jesus as recorded in John's gospel, presumes that Jesus' life was the culmination of the unfolding revelation of God's redemptive plan for mankind, a revelation that had started from the very dawn of creation.

Jesus' discussion with the Samaritan woman is steeped in the history of the Jewish nation and the peoples of Samaria and is a classic example of the way in which Jesus used an everyday experience to present a deeply spiritual message, make a significant contribution to the spread of the news about his activities and to make a resounding statement about the new order that he was ushering in, in direct opposition to the accepted social order of the day.

Historical Background

There was a long history of worship in this region of Samaria. Both Abraham and Jacob erected altars at Shechem, near to Mount Gerizim; the Israelites had a blessing pronounced on them from the mountain; for 300 years they worshipped in the area at Shiloh; and eventually they built a temple on Mt. Gerizim and worshipped there.

Much of the conversation that took place between Jesus and the woman had its roots in the historical context of Samaria. When the Northern Kingdoms, of which Samaria was a part, were conquered by the Assyrians, the Jews were carried away into captivity in Babylonia in 721BC. This left Samaria very thinly populated and to redress this situation the kings of Assyria repopulated the area by planting colonies of mixed race people into the region. In due course these people intermarried with the Jews remaining in Samaria and thus created the 'hybrid' group that became known as the Samaritans.

After the Jews were released from the Babylonian captivity and had returned to Judea under Ezra's they had a desire to rebuild the city walls of Jerusalem and the temple, under Nehemiah a course of action that was strongly opposed by the Samaritans.

In the times of Ezra and Nehemiah, there was an enthusiasm to re-emphasise the purity of the Jewish race and the tensions grew a little deeper particularly in respect of the mixed ancestry of the Samaritans. Around this time Sanballat was the chief of the Samaritans. Sanballat is believed to be either a descendant of an Israelite family that did not go into captivity in 721BC or from one of the peoples that the Assyrian kings had imported into Samaria during the exile. Nehemiah 13:28 records that one of Sanballat's daughters married the grandson of Eliashib, the high priest, even though Nehemiah had talked about the act of their sons marrying 'foreign' women (e.g Samaritan women) as 'treacherous acts'. [Josephus records an account of this type (though he dates it some 100 years later) and refers to Mannaseh, a priest, marrying Sanballat's daughter and foregoing his priesthood by going to live in Samaria].

In 330BC, the Greeks, under Alexander the Great, conquered the Persian Empire, of which Samaria formed a part, and allowed the Samaritans to build their own temple on Mount Gerizim. However this temple was destroyed by Hyrcanus in 128BC.

Perhaps the level of animosity between the Jews and Samaritans is adequately summed up in this quotation from the Jewish Rabbis: "It is prohibited to eat the bread and drink the wine of a Samaritan. If anyone receives a Samaritan into his house and ministers to him, he will cause his children to be carried into captivity. He who eats the bread of a Samaritan, is as if he ate swine's flesh."

Immediate Background

Jesus was preaching in Judea when, perhaps in response to the growing interest in his activities by the Pharisees, He set out to travel to Galilee and even though it was commonplace for Jews to travel by a circuitous route that avoided travel through Samaria, Jesus actually took the shortest and most direct route north that took him through the heart of Samaria. It is of course well known that there was a deep-seated hatred between the traditional Jews and the Samaritans much of that hatred probably based on the Jews rejection of the Samaritans as pure-bred Jews and partially because of the Samaritans insistence on Mount Gerizim being the proper place of worship rather than Jerusalem.

John records that Jesus and his disciples arrived at the well at Sychar, near the city of Samaria, at the 6th hour, that is around 12 noon. It is very likely that the well at which Jesus rested was that dug by, or on behalf of, Jacob. It would be hot and Jesus would be tired from the journey, so he stayed by the well whilst the disciples went to the city to buy provisions. It was usual for the women to draw water in the morning when it was cooler and the most likely reason for this woman drawing water at noon is that she was considered a 'loose' woman due to her past and the fact that she was currently living with a man who was not her husband – so she wanted to avoid contact with them.

What happens next is remarkable. The fact that Jesus spoke to a Samaritan was itself against all the established norms. That he, a Rabbi, spoke to a Samaritan woman of loose reputation, is evidence that Jesus had no time at all for the accepted order of things. In the early stages of his ministry it signifies that he was not about to reinforce traditional views and that his ministry was to bring a radical new perspective to human relationships. It perhaps speaks of the coming universality of the message of salvation that he preached. In his article in the February issue of this magazine, Ian Davidson included this quotation from William Barclay: "Rabbis so despised women and so thought them incapable of receiving any real teaching that they said: 'Better that the words of the law should be burned than to deliver to women.' They had a saying: 'Each time that a man prolongs converse with a woman he curses evil to himself, and desists from the law, and in the end inherits Gehinnom.'" Strong stuff indeed and it was no wonder that the Pharisees were already showing real nervousness at the news of Jesus' teaching and activities. Even his disciples were astonished at the scene as they returned to Jesus.



Lessons from the dialogue

There are so many lessons to draw from the dialogue that ensues between Jesus and the woman – and incidentally it seems that she was not ignorant of her religious ancestry or her expectations. She spoke of 'our father Jacob'; she referred to the historical worship practices of her people and of the Jews; she told Jesus of her expectation of the coming Messiah. So what are the key messages?

- As on so many other occasions Jesus uses an everyday occurrence, here the drawing of water, to introduce a deeply spiritual and eternal truth;
- Jesus asks a relatively small favour, water from the well, and offers a glorious gift, that is 'a spring of living water welling up to eternal life';
- Jesus settled the debate about worship by insisting that salvation was to come from the Jewish race through the agency of Jesus;
- As he did with Nicodemus (Jesus told Nicodemus that he had seen him under the fig tree), Jesus reveals something of his true nature by telling the woman something that he, in the natural order of things, had no way of knowing; by asking the woman to bring her husband, he opened up the opportunity to reveal his authority through his knowledge of the woman's past and present marital status and used this to introduce another lesson about true worship; this evidently had a profound effect on the woman, 'Sir, I see that you are a prophet';
- He used the occasion to teach his disciples. When they returned with food and Jesus said that he 'had food to eat of which they did not know' they immediately assumed someone had given physical food to Jesus. But Jesus said, 'My will is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work'.

The effect on the woman

Jesus was expert at creating situations that he could use. As the dialogue progressed and the woman spoke of her expectation of the coming Messiah, Jesus for the first recorded time identified himself as the Messiah by uttering the words, "I who speak to you am he." Suddenly this ill-regarded woman, this Samaritan woman, had a wonderful story to tell; not just a man, not just a Jewish man, not just even a Jewish rabbi, but the Messiah himself had been revealed to her. This truly was the astonishing action of one who had come to change people's lives and change their understanding of 'true religion'. So wonderful was the news that any thought of 'keeping herself to herself' was abandoned as she rushed into the city and told the people what had happened. I love the response of the woman and the people who heard her. Many believed there and then whilst others rushed out to Jesus and, hearing him teach, believed him. Jesus was breaking the barriers down, reconciling peoples and bringing the news of salvation.

I'm told that our late Bro Leonard Morgan referred to the unfolding revelation of God's plan for mankind as being like gradually folding back the tablecloth to reveal the feast underneath. Here, through one woman, Jesus made known something more of his mission. On one hot afternoon by the well he had dismantled unacceptable social traditions, shown the way forward for deep-seated historical enmity, revealed himself as the Messiah, and set a city buzzing with the news of the message that he was bringing.

News and Information

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Your donations have been of great assistance to growth of the Church in Ghana and we sincerely thank all who have contributed.

Careful consideration goes into the allocation of funds to obtain maximum benefit, not only for the saving of lives physically through medical aid, but especially the saving of souls through evangelism and church growth.

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John Kneller

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<i>John Griffiths:</i>	The Multicultural Congregation
<i>Trevor Williams:</i>	Working with Older Christians
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For booking information and any other queries please contact:

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Paul Halliday: 01633 858868
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JOHN K. KNELLER, 4 Glassel Park Road, Longniddry, East Lothian, EH32 0NY.

E-mail: john@kkneller.freeseve.co.uk

Tel: 01875 853212 to whom change of address should be sent.

EDITOR: ROBERT MARSDEN, 4 The Copse, Orrell Road, Orrell, Wigan, England, WN5 8HL. Tel: 01942 212320 E-mail: bobmarsden@bulldoghome.com