

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"

A Happy New Year to all our readers. May it be a year in which our love for God grows ever stronger and our resolve to serve Him remains undiminished. Whilst we serve, let us rejoice in our salvation and in the eternal provision that God, through our precious Saviour Jesus, has made for us.

Editorial **The ethics of true religion**

We hear quite a lot today about ethics and many study courses in religion and philosophy will contain an element (or module) about ethics. It isn't a biblical term though the word is often used in religious circles though it is common currency within, for example, professional bodies, which will have a 'code of ethics'. It is unusual to have the word used in the singular now and much more commonly we come across the word used in the plural. The dictionary definition provides a very strong clue as to why 'ethics' is a common word in religious circles, defining it as "a system of morals, rules of behaviour". The dictionary also states that ethics is "that branch of philosophy which is concerned with human character and conduct". Now philosophy is defined as "pursuit of wisdom and knowledge; investigation of the nature of being". It may not suit the purist but if we put those ideas together we could conclude that ethics is "the pursuit of knowledge about human character and conduct and the resulting system of morals".

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THE MORAL MAZE

Ethical policies have become something of a feature of the political and financial worlds and in this sense the term is used quite loosely. You may recall that when the current government came to power in 1997, it envisaged adopting what it called an 'ethical foreign policy'. No doubt this is one of those fine sounding policies that is far easier to conceive in opposition than it is to put into practice in the frighteningly complex world of international politics. There have also been a number of investment funds in recent years that have promoted the idea that they will only invest in companies that have 'ethical' business dealings. This may therefore exclude investment in companies that are reckoned not to follow environmentally friendly processes or those that exploit cheap labour in developing countries. It is notionally being stated in these cases that there is a system of morals or a pattern of behaviour that is to be pursued and equally that there are some activities that are off limits.

I have to say that I do admire those people who have such a strong sense of ethics that it very much changes their behaviour. I recall one sister at the congregation at Albert Street in Wigan who for as long as the apartheid regime continued in South Africa steadfastly refused to buy any produce from that country and would go to some lengths to ensure that she didn't do so inadvertently. Other people have maybe refused to buy some brands of football because they have been produced using the cheap labour of young children working in conditions that would not be tolerated in our country. Some of the environmental pressure groups try to persuade us not to buy a certain brand of petrol due to the environmental damage that they claim is done during the extraction of the oil. What all of these situations demand is that a "system of morals" is defined and adhered to by those individuals or organisation who buy into that system and one of the consistent results of such stances is that there is some penalty, financial or otherwise, in pursuing that policy. To do it properly substantial time, effort and research may well be required.

CREED AND ETHICS

Again it may be over-simplistic but I think it is possible to identify two different, but inevitably related and to some extent inter-dependent, tenets of the Christian faith. Firstly, there are those things which we believe, and in some denominations these have been developed into a statement of beliefs, commonly known as a 'creed'. Churches of Christ have traditionally not expressed their body of belief in a creed, no doubt accepting that the Bible itself is entirely sufficient as a statement of our beliefs. Secondly, there is the way that we behave, our conduct in life and these are our ethics. It seems axiomatic that the second of these, the way that we behave, our ethics, should be directly related to our beliefs though I suspect that there are a lot of people who can recite a denominational creed verbatim, but whose manner of life is inconsistent with the belief expressed in that creed.

The divine revelation contains some very broad sweeps of the ethical standards by which the Christian is to live and it is important that we recognise that it is not in our own gift to define the ethical standards by which we will choose to live because that

prerogative belongs to God and he has exercised it. We will inevitably have to make personal choices along the way but it is essential that these choices are informed by our knowledge of what God expects of us. When Moses addressed the nation of Israel he expressed what God required of his people. **“And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of the Lord, which I command you this day for your good?”** That is a pattern that is largely repeated in Mark’s gospel record as Jesus affirms the statement of a scribe about the essential characteristics of a person’s response to God. The scribe says to Jesus, **“You are right, Teacher, you have truly said that he is one, and there is no other but he; and to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength, and to love one’s neighbour as oneself, is much more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.”**

WHAT GOD REQUIRES

There is no option for the Christian to develop a personal code of ethics which does not give due regard to these fundamental requirements of our relationship with God. Loving and serving God, walking in his ways, keeping his commandments and devoting all of our energies to exercising that love and extending that same duty to our neighbours, are non-negotiable. There is no system of morals to satisfy God that excludes these principles. However just as Paul identified that one Christian’s moral code might differ from another’s in certain matters (often based on the greater maturity of one over the other), he also recognised and taught that even in those situations the ‘higher’ ethic of love for neighbour, in this case expressed as refusing to become a stumbling-block to a weaker brother, should take precedence over what the stronger brother might incorporate into his own moral code.

I said earlier that I admired those people who had the ethical resolve to change their behaviour to reflect their moral code. That’s a comment that I would make about any person whether a Christian or not. It should of course go without saying that the Christian whose life is being transformed as a result of a growing appreciation of God’s will for us, is bound to be modifying his or her behaviour if they are living under God’s code of ethics as described above. The Christian who blithely states, ‘I can’t change, it’s just the way I am’ has missed the point of the transforming power of the indwelling Spirit.

James provides a very succinct statement about ‘true religion’. On the face of it the statement is very specific, **“Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.”** (James 1:27) However I think this bears out the same principles of faithfulness in our relationship with God and concern and justice for those (our neighbours) who are in a less fortunate situation than ourselves. The word used for orphans (or fatherless in other translations) is the same word that is in other places interpreted as desolate or comfortless. There was of course no welfare system to ensure that the needs of widows were catered for and

God shows special compassion for them. **"He (God) executes justice for the fatherless and the widow and the sojourner, giving him food and clothing."** (Deut 10:18) **"Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation."** (Psalm 68:5) Under the Mosaic Law the Hebrews were enjoined to treat widows with justice and consideration and Jesus had a warning for those who took advantage of those least able to defend themselves, **"Beware of the scribes... who devour widows houses and for a pretence make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation"** (Mark 12:38) Justice, right-living, compassion, loving-kindness and faithfulness to God and his commandments are the bedrock of the Christian ethic.

Speaking of God's judgement on rebellious Israel, Micah has these words of advice for them if they were to achieve restoration. **"He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"**

THE MORAL IMPERATIVE

Earlier I noted that when some people establish their personal code of ethics (and I'm not necessarily referring to Christians here) very often they do at some cost to themselves. The person who doesn't buy what is potentially the cheapest product because of concerns about its means of production will either not buy at all, and therefore deny themselves the pleasure of ownership, or will pay more for an alternative. However for the Christian, 'true religion' and Christian ethics based on God's requirements of his people, will inevitably lead to sacrifice and self-denial. And self-denial was most decisively demonstrated by Jesus before and during his life of ministry and most compellingly as he went to his death.

True religion and the Christian ethic has very little to do with the 'noise' that often accompanies religious discussion. But it has everything to do with Jesus, the Son of God, being put to death by the hand of sinful men. It concerns the Creator of all things purchasing redemption, at the ultimate cost, in the ultimate act of self-denial, for people who by any worldly assessment (though thankfully not by divine assessment) were not worthy of it. If we in our mind's eye stand at the foot of the cross and look on Jesus, we are confronted with the reality of the Saviour of the world in physical and mental agony as he fulfils the plan of salvation. It is that knowledge above anything else that should lie behind our system of morals and conduct and release in us all of the compulsion to show justice, love, compassion, kindness and obedience to God.

Worth Thinking About

It isn't necessary to blow out the other person's light to let your own shine.

If you would have friends, be a friend. It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness.

Word Study **BLASPHEMY**

(Ian S. Davidson, Motherwell)

The word "blasphemy" is a terrible word. It is a transliteration of the Greek original and means, in the verb form, "to speak reproachfully, to slander, calumniate, rail at, or revile." Blasphemy is, therefore, a sin of the tongue. Without speaking, it is impossible to commit the sin of blasphemy.

The terms *blaspheme*, *blasphemy*, *blasphemer* and *blasphemous* are found in the New Testament scriptures. Interestingly, the noun and the verb are most common in the book of Revelation. The Old Testament scriptures also refer to this sin. For example, we read in Leviticus: "**And he who blasphemes the name of the Lord, he shall surely be put to death, and all the congregation shall certainly stone him: as well the stranger, as he who is born in the land, when he blasphemes the name of the Lord, shall be put to death.**" (24:16).

Unbelievably, Jesus was accused of blasphemy during His ministry. (Matthew 9:3; 26:65; Mark 2:7; 14:64; Luke 5:21; John 10:33). So was Stephen (Acts 6:11,13). The apostle Paul described himself as a blasphemer at one time (1 Timothy 1:13). The sin was clearly and unequivocally condemned by him. (Colossians 3: 8).

BLASPHEMY AGAINST GOD

The "beast" of Revelation was guilty of blasphemy. We read: "**And I stood upon the sand of the sea, and saw a beast rise up out of the sea, having seven heads and ten horns, and upon his horns ten crowns, and upon his head the name of blasphemy...And there was given unto him a mouth speaking great things and blasphemies; and power was given unto him to continue forty and two months. And he opened his mouth in blasphemy against God, to blaspheme His name, and His tabernacle, and them who dwell in heaven.**" (13: 1,5,6) Later, we read of men blaspheming God in response to Divine punishment (16: 9,11,21). Then there is the picture of the woman arrayed in purple and scarlet who did "**sit upon a scarlet coloured beast, full of the names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns.**" (17:3) To whom do the beast and the woman refer? The Bible is its best interpreter. For example, we later read in Revelation 17: "**And here is the mind which has wisdom. The seven heads are seven mountains, on which the woman sits.**" (v9). "**And the ten horns which you saw are ten kings, which have received no kingdom as yet; but receive power as kings one hour with the beast.**" (v12)

PROBLEM TEXTS

R.P. Martin sees two problem texts on this subject: 2 Peter 2:10-11 and Matthew 12:32 (with Mark 3:29). We read: "**...but chiefly those who walk after the flesh in the lust of uncleanness, and despise government. Presumptuous are they, self-willed, they are not afraid to speak evil (*blasphemeo*) of dignities. Whereas angels, which are greater in power and might, bring not railing (*blasphemos*) accusation against them before the Lord "** (2 Peter 2:10,11). Albert Barnes refers us to Jude 9 & 10 to help us in our understanding of this passage. David H. Wheaton has pointed out that "dignities" may refer to angels. He writes: "...it could be that they used the behaviour of the fallen angels in Genesis 6:1-4 as a justification for their own

immorality, and spoke evil of the unfallen angels by holding that such behaviour was typical of all angels... Angels, by contrast, have the right to complain to God of the behaviour of these arrogant mortals, but refuse to do so: this may be a reference to the kind of incident described in Jude 9." William Barclay has written: " This is a strange and difficult passage; but the meaning is clear. Even angels, when they sinned, were punished. How much more shall men be punished? Angels could not rebel against God and escape the consequences. How shall men escape? And men need not seek to put the blame on others, not even on angels; nothing but their own rebelliousness is responsible for their sin."

BLASPHEMY AGAINST THE SPIRIT

Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit has caused much comment. We read these words of Jesus: "**And whosoever speaks a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come.**" (Matthew 12:32). The passage, of course, must be read in its context. Jesus had healed a blind demoniac. When the Pharisees heard what He had done, they accused Him of casting out demons by Beelzebub, the prince of the demons. Jesus pointed out the impossibility of this action. It meant that Satan was divided against himself. The Lord went on to say: "**And if I by Beelzebub cast out demons, by whom do your children cast them out? Therefore they shall be your judges.**" (v27) The situation was very clear: Jesus was genuine and the Spirit of God was at work. To say that Jesus had an unclean spirit was to blaspheme against the Holy Spirit and put oneself in a position for which forgiveness is not provided.

PREVENTS MEN FROM SEEING GOD

Why is this sin so heinous? Because it was, as one writer has put it: "a malicious conspiracy to deprive men of eternal life because of personal jealousy and hostility." Jesus performed miracles, which included casting out of demons, to show to people that He was the Christ, the Son of the Living God. The signs were designed to make believers in Him. The apostle John wrote towards the conclusion of his gospel record: "**And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book: but these are written, that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you might have life through His name.**" (John 20:30,31). Carl Ketcherside has written: "To behold the signs done to produce faith, and against all observation, knowledge, and conscience, assign that power to Satan for the specific purpose of destroying faith is to condemn mankind once for all to eternal death."

But why is there no forgiveness for this malign act? The simplest answer is because God has placed it outside the pale of Divine forgiveness. Yes, there is the grace of God and grace covers sin, but this particular sin is beyond the limit, is outside the circle of God's grace. It is that simple. Those who were guilty of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit possessed hearts of stone. I believe their hearts were so hardened that they were totally beyond repentance. Their damnation of the work of the Spirit had damned themselves. Truly, each had sinned away his or her day of grace.

Can people commit the unpardonable sin today? Yes, it is possible. Note what Jesus said: "**...but whosoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come.**" (Matthew 12:32b). "This world" refers to the dispensation in which Jesus lived. The "world to come" speaks of the Messianic age or the Christian age – the dispensation in which we now live. The sin is as unpardonable now as it was in Jesus' day.

Then the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the way, with his drawn sword in his hand;

Balaam's Ways (2)

(Brian J Boland)

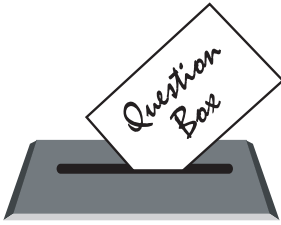
In the previous article we touched upon the 'When' and 'Where' of Balaam. In this issue we will start to look at the 'Who' and dwell on the issue of the significance of names used in the Bible. The letter to the angel of the church at Pergamum (Revelation 2:14,15) brings together the teachings of Balaam and the Nicolaitans. When God created male and female He called them Adam (Genesis 5.2) This is seen more clearly in "The Complete Jewish Bible (CJB) Genesis 2:7, **" Then Adonai, God, formed a person (Hebrew: adam) from the dust of the ground (Hebrew: adamah) and breathed into his nostril the breath of life."** Then in Genesis 3.20 **"The man called his wife Havah (life) because she was the mother of all the living (CJB).** Names were given then for a reason. Note the change from Abram to Abraham, Sara to Sarah. The practice continued in the New Testament. The Angel Gabriel said to Mary **"And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus."**(Luke 1:31 ESV) The name Gabriel also is significant as it means "God is Mighty". Then observe the shock at the naming of John (the Baptist) in Luke 1.63 and the Lord's renaming of Simon to Peter (Mark 3.16;John 1.42)

The names Balaam and Nicolaos are also of great import. 'Nicolaitan' is derived from three Greek words 'Nikos' meaning victory, triumphantly (1 Corinthians 15.55 Revelation 6.2); 'Laos' meaning people (Matthew 26.5) and the closing syllable denotes a "belonging". What is remarkable is in comparing this meaning to 'Balaam' which is a Hebrew word derived from 'Bala' meaning devour, destroy (Habakkuk 1.13) and 'am' meaning people (Genesis 11.6). Both these parties then have names that carry the same meaning that symbolise having power over the people. Early church writers identify two men called Nicolaus; one being the seventh deacon named in Acts 6.5; the other six have established histories of working in the church. Ignatius (AD 50-100) identified Nicolaus as the Pergamum heretic. A hundred years or so later there was an ascetic sect with the same name not to be confused with the earlier party.

When Phillip **"preached the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus"** (Acts 8.12 ESV) his hearers were baptised. A few verses on the Lord tells Ananias that Saul is his chosen instrument **"to carry my name before the gentiles and kings and the children of Israel."** (Acts 9.15 ESC) Peter then in the next chapter proclaims that all the prophets give witness that everyone who believes in him **"receives forgiveness through his name.** (Acts 10.43 ESV) And Paul told the tribune that Ananias, a devout Jew had told him **"Get up and immerse yourself and have your sins washed away as you call on his name** (Acts 22.16 CJB)

The disciples of Jesus were concerned that some were healing in the name of Jesus who were **"not one of us"** so they told him to stop. But Jesus said, **"Don't stop him, because no one who works a miracle in my name will soon after be able to say something bad about me. For whoever is not against us is for us."** Mark 9:39,40 CJB. Those seeking a place in heaven have always to remember that there is only one name, and adherence to His teachings that will get us there. There must be no "not one of us" allegiances or denominational titles, our only call should be: **"let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom God raised from the dead-for there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved"** (ESV) Acts 4:10-12. 2700 years ago the prophet Isaiah expanded on this name (Isaiah 9.6.CJB) **"Wonder of a Counsellor, Mighty God, Father of Eternity, Prince of Peace."**

What a Saviour!



THE QUESTION

This month the question we are to consider has been prompted by the statement of Jesus found in John 14:2 of the 'Authorized Version', where we read, "...in my Father's house are many mansions", and the question is, "Are there really 'mansions' in Heaven?"

In order to answer this question, we must first ask two other questions

1. To what did the Lord refer when he used the phrase, '*my Father's house?*' Was he, in fact, referring to Heaven?
2. What is the meaning of the word, which is here rendered '*mansions?*'

Now, these are crucial questions, because when this verse is quoted in a sermon, the way it is used almost invariably leads the hearers to believe that it reveals what the Lord Jesus is preparing in the hereafter for those who believe in him, and, not surprisingly therefore, it is unquestioningly thought to refer to Heaven.

I hope that, after looking at the verse more closely, we shall see that its significance is even wider than that.

FIRST, THEN, CONSIDER THAT PHRASE, 'MY FATHER'S HOUSE'.

The Lord Jesus was the only person to use it, and the Scriptures only record him using it twice; here in John 14:2, and earlier in John 2; 16, where we read about his cleansing of the Temple at the *beginning* of his ministry. At that time he said, **"Make not my Father's house a house of merchandise"**.

There can be no doubt that, on that occasion, he was referring to the Temple in Jerusalem as his 'Father's house'. His disciples certainly understood this, because we are told that they **"remembered that it was written, 'the zeal of Thy house has eaten me up.'"** (Psalm 69:9)

We may be quite sure, therefore, that, having witnessed his actions, and having heard his words on the earlier occasion, the Twelve had no difficulty in understanding him, when, near the *close* of his ministry, he again used the expression, '*My Father's house*'. They would recognize that Jesus was saying that his 'Father's house' was the Temple. And, indeed, in the whole of Palestine in those days, I doubt if you could have found a single Jew who did not also believe this. Whatever else Sadducees and Pharisees may have disagreed about, there would be no debate on that point!

The Psalmist expressed how all Jews felt about the Temple when he wrote, **"I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go up to the House of the LORD.'" (Psa.122: 1).** This was one of the 'Psalms of Ascent' which they sang as they made their way up to the 'City of David' to present themselves before God, in His house, when they celebrated the major annual Feasts, and the briefest of glances at the five books of Psalms will show clearly that such expressions as, '*the house of the Lord*, and, '*God's house*', occur constantly, in referring to the Temple.

SECONDLY: THE WORD 'MANSIONS'.

Let us now think about this word which the 'Authorized Version' uses in John 14:2. Please bear in mind that this well-loved version of the Scriptures which first appeared in 1611, was, for more than 250 years, the only version in English available to the vast majority of Christians. Furthermore, even later, when the 'English Revised Version' was produced in 1881, it still retained the word '*mansions*'.

It is not surprising, therefore, that many hymn-writers, influenced by these early translations, produced songs and hymns which proclaimed the bliss to be enjoyed by the redeemed in the '*many mansions*' of '*heaven*'. How could they have done otherwise?

One of these hymns, popular in certain parts of the United States, proclaims that there will be '*no mortgages in heaven*'. Another has the congregation declaring, '*I want a mansion of silver and gold*'. And another song proclaims that there is '*an empty mansion just waiting for me*'.

You may also have noticed that in some of the 'song-books' in use in this country, we too, are sometimes invited to sing "*Yonder, over the rolling River, where the shining mansions rise.....*"

The hymn-list is almost endless, and this is perhaps understandable when we realise that many of these songs, hymns and 'spirituals' may be traced back to the Negro slaves, who, before – and even after – their emancipation, living in appalling conditions, and having little to hope for in this life, and supported only by their faith, focussed their hopes on the '*mansions of glory*' in the '*better land*' on '*the other side of the Jordan*'.

It is interesting to notice that in the Lord's statement, '*In my Father's house*', the word for '*house*', is '*oikos*', which is the usual Greek word, and occurs more than 100 times in the New Testament. In contrast, the other word he used, that is translated '*mansions*', is the Greek word '*monee*', and this occurs only once in the entire New Testament; here, in John 14:2.

In versions of the New Testament produced after 1881, '*monee*' has been rendered in a variety of ways, but '*mansions*' is not now used. For example,

- the 'Revised Standard Version', published in 1946, '*mansions*' was replaced, first, with '*abiding places*', and later in the 2nd edition of 1971, with '*rooms*'.
- Moffat's translation has '*abodes*'.
- Knox gives us '*dwelling places*'.
- The 'New King James Translation' says, '*places to live*'.
- E.V.Rieu renders it '*resting places*'.
- And, one 'translation', 'The Living New Testament', (which really is not a translation at all, but an interpretation – and a ridiculous one at that), offers us, '*houses up there where my Father lives*', which is even worse than '*mansions*'!

MANY ROOMS IN THE TEMPLE

We see, then, that what the Lord said was, '*In my Father's house are many rooms*'. The disciples would not take this as a reference to heaven, but, would know he was alluding to the Temple, and they would realize that he was using an illustration, because they most certainly knew that the Temple-complex contained about 70 rooms, all having their particular uses. '*Many rooms*'!

In other words, Jesus was using the Temple as an object-lesson; presenting a sort of parable; painting a picture, with the intention of teaching his disciples something of tremendous importance.

WHAT WAS THE MESSAGE?

John 13:1 reveals that Jesus was aware that the time had come for him to **'depart out of this world'**. He also knew that when he broke this news to his disciples it would have a devastating effect upon them, and so, at v.13, we hear him addressing them with that tender expression, *'little children'*. He was right, of course!

Four of them responded immediately to the news that he was going away. It seemed that they were losing him, especially since he had warned them, **"Where I am going you cannot come."**

- Peter looked for a destination. *"Where are you going?"*
- Thomas, the practical man, asked to know *how* they might come to know the way.
- Philip, the spiritually-minded man, was concerned to know *to whom* Jesus was going. **"Show us the Father."**
- And, finally, Jude wanted to know *why* Jesus promised to reveal himself to them, but not to the world.

So, when Jesus said, **"Let not your hearts be troubled... In my Father's house are many rooms... I go to prepare a place for you,"** he was reminding them that, just as there were many rooms in the Temple, which represented God's dwelling-place among His people, with His Presence filling all of them, so, also, the entire Universe is His 'house' and it, also, is filled with His Presence.

The glorious truth revealed by Jesus is that the Father, occupies all of Time and Space. The Psalmists and the prophets had hinted at this truth. They caught glimpses of something that was really quite beyond their comprehension. It remained for the Lord Jesus to speak about it in this definitive, confident and reassuring way.

- Everything that exists has been created by the Father – and is filled by His Presence.
- Planets and worlds – known and unknown, seen and unseen – are 'rooms' in His house.
- Our Earth is one of those – and Jesus was about to leave it.
- But he was only moving *'from one room to another'* in his *'Father's house'*.
- One day, these men, who had been saddened by the news of his imminent departure, would rise up and follow him. They, also, would go to that *'other room'* which their Lord was now going to prepare for them.
- He would not be far from them; just in the next room in the Father's house.
- For all Christians such a message as this should dispel the fear of death and draw out its sting.
- And, we should always remember that, of all the religious faiths in the world, Christianity alone brings such a comforting message!

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(The Question Box is empty!)**

Editor's Note. I have discussed the lack of questions with Frank in the past and we have decided that there is no point in 'making-up' questions to keep this feature going – questions must be genuine inquiries from readers or their contacts. I am personally committed to this feature continuing because we need authoritative, researched answers to questions. So it is up to you the readership. No questions means no QB and the SS will be very much the poorer for that.

Aspects of Living

Immortality

(The third in a series on Aspects of Living from the writing
of Alf Marsden, deceased)

The only thing certain in life is that one day we will die. The Bible says, **“And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgement, so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many.”** Now this obviously is referring to natural death; no man, in this sense, is immortal. It is reported that when Edwin, the Anglo-Saxon king, was deciding as to whether he should receive missionaries, one of his nobles said to him, “We are as ignorant of the state which preceded our present existence as of that which will follow it. If this new faith can give us more certainty, it deserves to be received.” As we can no doubt guess, the missionaries would speak about the immortality of the soul.

Immortality of the soul

How can the soul be immortal? We are taught that in the beginning God created man. The Scripture then goes on, **“And he breathed into his nostrils the breath of lives.”** Whatever the phrase, ‘the breath of lives’ may mean, it is certain that what was breathed emanated from God in the pre-Fall period and so must have been immortal as He is. On this basis, God can say through Ezekiel the prophet, “Behold all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine; the soul who sins shall die.” (Ezek. 18:4) It is also important to note what Jesus said to his disciples, **“And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear him who is able to destroy both body and soul in hell.”** (Matt 10:28) When Jesus says ‘do not fear those’, He is using a generic term for all mankind; but when he says, ‘fear him who is able to destroy both body and soul in hell’, then He is speaking about Satan. This raises two very important points i.e. the body is not the soul, and, only Satan can ‘destroy’ the soul. The word ‘destroy’ must be understood in this context not to mean total extinction, but rather loss of well-being through being unsaved.

Down through the ages the mind of man has concentrated on thinking about, and preparing for, death. The Egyptians spent vast amounts of time and labour on building great pyramidal mausoleums, and employed a good degree of ingenuity in preserving the body after death by their methods of embalming. Much later, the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory struck the fear of death into the minds of people, with its insistence on there being a place of spiritual purging or expiation. It was only when Christian thought and doctrine started to concentrate on life after death that peoples attitude to death, especially that of Christian people, began to change. This coincided with emphasis on the spiritual life over mortality. This was greatly enhanced by the teaching concerning the resurrection of Christ. A new era of acknowledging the value of the soul over the body had dawned!

The soul’s salvation

How does this concept of the immortality of the soul help us? We live because we have a desire to live; to move to a higher plane of knowledge and virtuous application by furthering our knowledge of the Creator and His work and designs for us. Our new attitude is exemplified by the words of Paul, **“We do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.”** (2 Cor 4:18) It is God Himself who leads us on to envisage the

eternal, unseen things, and we trust Him for His power to bring us to things which are as yet unseen by us. We must infer our eternal destiny by the preparation God has put into it.

It is the word of God, the Bible, that holds out the prospect of the salvation of the soul. James says, **"Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflowing wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. But be ye doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves."** (James 1:21,22) It is not enough just to let our thoughts transcend this life and contemplate the after-life; God's revelation teaches us that there are things to do whilst we are here on earth; no matter if we have experienced the new birth by water and the Spirit, we cannot consider ourselves to be completely born into God's Heaven until the soul has passed through death; it is then released from bodily mortality and can return to its Creator.

Resurrection and re-clothing

Many have speculated as to what this soul after-life will be like. Indeed sceptics have ridiculed the whole idea of after-life; many will say, 'once you are dead, you are dead'. Others have said that only certain people will go to Heaven; the rest, they argue will occupy a newly created earth. Many in the eastern religions believe that there will be a succession of re-incarnations until the ideal state is reached. All claim to have some written evidence or verification by tradition for their beliefs.

The Christian however has a well-documented basis for his or her beliefs.

This is given inspirationally by the apostle, Paul, in particular. He says that some will ask, **"How are the dead raised up, and with what body do they come?"** Paul looks upon this question as foolish; **"Foolish one, what you sow is not made alive unless it dies."** He then goes on to point out that when the sower sows seed into the ground, he is merely sowing seed and not the body that shall appear when the seed has brought forth its head of fruit. On the human level, he speaks about the resurrection of the dead, **"It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body: God will give a body as it pleases Him."** The corruptible man must 'put on' that which will be incorruptible, and the mortal must put on immortality. Only then, in Paul's inimitable words is "death swallowed up in victory."



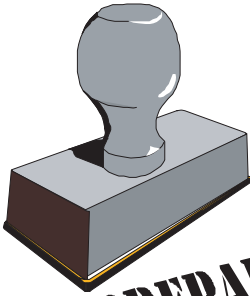
God-breathed life

This then is the sum of it all. God breathed into man the life principle; the soul is the resulting life constituted in the individual. Hebrews 4:12 reads, **"For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart."** The same word teaches us that physical man (the body) was created from the dust of the earth. It was inanimate until God breathed the spirit of life into it, and the principle and effect of this spirit-life was to make the created man a living soul. Hebrews 4 suggests that it is extremely difficult to distinguish between soul and spirit, but the same word teaches us that body and spirit are separated at physical death.

Writing to Timothy about God, Paul states, "Who (i.e. God) alone has immortality, dwelling in approachable light, whom no man can see or has seen, to whom be honour and everlasting power." (1 Tim. 6:16) In his second letter to Timothy, Paul further reveals that God's saving grace was purposed in Christ Jesus before time began. This grace and purpose, he goes on gloriously to assert, "has now been revealed by the appearing of our Saviour Jesus Christ, who has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel." (2 Tim 1:9,10) This gift of immortality must be accepted by man precisely as it is – A GIFT; the gift of eternal life from the eternal God, ultimately and gloriously sharing, with the Son, the life of God.

FOR 2004

(Submitted by John Morgan, Hindley)



BE PREPARED

I am not one to make New Year's resolutions. I have tried that in the past and found they go by the way-side in a couple of months. I'm still the same weight as I have been for the past several years. I have this list that I carry in my Bible that I thought I would share with you all this year though. I pull it out and read it occasionally and just mentally check myself. I don't remember where I came by it but I hope you find it helpful.

1. Keep a chain on your tongue. Always say less than you think. You don't have to put your brain into neutral when your tongue is in gear. Every unspoken word should pass through these three doors: (1) Is it true? (2) Is it kind? (3) Is it necessary?
2. Make promises sparingly and keep them faithfully, no matter what it costs you.
3. Never let an opportunity pass to say a kind and encouraging thing to or about someone. Praise good work, regardless of who did it. If criticism is needed, do it so it will help and not hinder.
4. Be interested in others, interested in their pursuits; their welfare; their homes and families. Rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn. Let everyone you meet, however humble, feel that you regard him as one of importance.
5. Be cheerful. Keep the corners of your mouth turned up. Hide your pains, worries and disappointments as much as possible under a smile. Laugh at good stories and learn to tell them.
6. Preserve an open mind on matters of opinion. Hold fast to matters of faith, but do so in a loving spirit.
7. Let your virtues speak for themselves, and refuse to talk of other's vices. Discourage gossip.
8. Be careful of another's feelings. Wit and humour at another's expense is rarely worth the effort and may hurt when least expected.
9. Pay no attention to ill-natured remarks about you. Simply live so that nobody will believe them.
10. Don't be anxious about your dues (what is due you). Do your work, be patient, keep your disposition sweet, forget self and you will be rewarded.



What do you think?

This is a new feature that I am trialling to determine if it can be run for the benefit of the readership. The purpose is to stimulate some input on issues that are of concern to many Christians and to which there is often no simple answer.

The feature will run like this. Periodically, probably every 3 months, a "What do you think?" item will be published, with a brief background note. Responses to that item will be invited and space for those responses (one page) will be reserved in the next two issues. I will, however, only print responses that are received by the publication deadline for the issue **immediately after** the "What do you think?" item has appeared. This deadline date will be specified. This is to ensure that articles are considered responses to the issue posed and not simply a counter-argument to another person's response.

I will of course ensure that as far as possible, the responses printed represent the balance of all responses.

I also need to stress that this is emphatically not intended as a replacement for the Question Box feature and I urge readers to continue to send questions to Bro. Frank for his consideration. In fact it might well provoke questions that it would be useful for Frank to deal with.

So here is the first issue.

To what extent, if at all, does God directly intervene in the affairs of Christians in the 21st century? Does direct intervention continue or like some 'spiritual gifts' did it cease as the apostolic age ended? When Christians experience problems should it always, sometimes or never be assumed that God is 'testing' the Christian? Equally when Christians experience good, is that God's blessing on them? When Christians feel moved to follow a certain path in life, is that God's direct action or the Christians own response based on his or her own conviction and knowledge of the Word? Does God 'use' problems to change us?

What do you think? Please limit answers to 600 words (though shorter responses are very acceptable) and submit them by Monday 16th February by email or post for, in this case, inclusion in the March issue (details on back page). Should I receive several replies by the deadline date, I will use more pages (2 maximum) or keep the feature open longer, though I do not guarantee to print every reply.

If you have any issue that you would like to be considered through this feature then again please send details by email or post.

News and Information

Ghana Appeal

We thank donors who have contributed to the Ghana Appeal and are encouraged by the beneficial effect this has had on the Lord's Church there. Many brethren have been cured of illness and death has been prevented – every life saved is a blessing, particularly of God-fearing parents.

Brethren have been enabled to extend the gospel, not only in areas near their own homes but further afield, and this has resulted in considerable growth in the number of congregations. One result of this is the number of young Christians needing good study material. Another is that the available finances are spread more thinly, which means that some needs cannot be adequately met.

In one area a group of about eleven churches are combining to carry out a gospel campaign - let us pray for their success. Cases of illness again include hernia, one of which is a double hernia. As this involves refraining from physical activity for a while it seriously affects the patient's income. It is particularly serious when the breadwinner in a family is ill and if he dies the family suffers severely - we have just received reports of several more widows who are now destitute.

Brethren, through your donations so much has been achieved. We appeal to you not to grow weary in continuing this good work.

Those wishing to contribute 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**

Obituary

Sister Jeanie Gillespie Wallacestone, Scotland

It is with deep regret that we report the death of Sister Jeanie Gillespie, the sister of the late Brother David Dougall. Jeanie fell asleep in Jesus on December 3rd 2003, aged 91. She was laid to rest on December 10th, the writer officiating at the service.

"Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord."

James Grant

Sister's Page

It has been suggested that the SS should contain a page by Sisters for Sisters. The SS has long accepted articles from Sisters and this seems to be a natural development. However though I am happy to run such a page in the magazine, I am not competent to edit it. So if there is a Sister out there who is willing to sub-edit a page of this kind then please contact me. It isn't too difficult and access to email makes the receipt and submission of content quite straightforward (though it isn't essential). Is anyone up to the challenge? My contact details are on the back page.

Both Prayer and Pains

(by J. Randal Matheny)
www.cloudburstpoetry.com

We must not sit and wait
for miracles to fall
from God, or celebrate,
from easy chairs, our call.

Be up and doing, put hand
to every worthy task.
With power, God will expand
your boundaries, if you ask.

Throw off your passive chains
and plow the deeper springs;
Through faith, both prayer and pains
in Christ will do all things.

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Bio line: Randal is an American missionary writer who has worked in Brazil since 1984. He edits Forthright Magazine (www.forthright.net) in English and publishes magazines and books in the Portuguese language.

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Reverence at the Worship Hour

Today, I went to worship. I took time to go early, I so badly needed to mediate and concentrate upon our Lord's goodness and love. The Table was set in anticipation of the service, and how sweet and sublime were my thoughts of Him as I viewed that holy reminder. The quietness of being alone before the service uplifted me, and the sober mediation quietened my anxiousness.

But the sweetness of that moment was broken, for others were coming to worship. Blithely they entered; happy and carefree they appeared; nonchalantly they spoke of the events of the past week, and glibly of the anticipation of the morrow. I gazed at the Table on which lay the emblems of the Lord's blood and body. Never had it been so apparent that lightness and frivolity only desecrate that holy memorial. How could it be possible that the God of Heavens would accept such nonchalance as worship?

- Adapted

Some minds are like concrete - all mixed up and permanently set.

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