

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...

..by the joy that was brought to a righteous and devout man.

Simeon lived in Jerusalem. The occasion was 8 days after the birth of Jesus. This devout man longed to see the 'restoration of Israel' and so he awaited the coming Messiah. There is an implication that Simeon was approaching the end of his life and yet the Holy Spirit had revealed to him that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. Just as God had fulfilled all previous promises, so in this one too he proved to be as good as his word. The Holy Spirit moved Simeon to enter the Temple and as Mary and Joseph entered the Temple to present Jesus so that the custom of the law might be carried out, Simeon's joy became complete.

Miraculously Simeon recognized the eight-day-old baby in the arms of his parents as the Messiah. Whatever he had been expecting he instantly knew that this was the promised one; that this baby was the one who was to bring comfort to Israel and salvation to the world. His joy was complete in the knowledge that God had kept his promise and that he could face the end of his life in the glorious knowledge that the Saviour had come. He thanked God like this:

"Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy Word; for mine eyes have seen thy salvation which thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to thy people Israel." (Luke 2:29-31) What joy! What insight into the very mind of God! What a revelation to this unheralded, probably aged man. The Messiah has come!

Unfortunately his further revelation to Mary was suffused with deep sadness. The Scripture doesn't tell us whether Mary understood the full importance of Simeon's next words. I think he foretells of Mary's despair as she would stand, in love, at the foot of the cross and watch her son prepare to die. "And a sword will pierce through your own soul also." As always in the story of Jesus there is no separating unbridled joy at his coming from the sorrow, yet triumph, of his death. Truly He was 'born to die'.

We wish all of our readers a peaceful Christmas. Like Simeon, may our overwhelming emotion be our inexpressible joy that we too have known the Messiah, that He is come and that salvation is ours because of Him.

Contents: 1-Be Inspired; 2-Word Study; 4-Balaam's Ways; 5-The Growing Church; 9-Foundation of the Faith; 12-Question Box; 15-News & Information.

Word Study SINCERE

Ian Davidson (Motherwell)

Our English word *sincere* is from the Latin *sine cera* and literally means "without wax". It originally applied to honey that was pure and transparent when held up to the sunlight. Later, the term was given a special significance. One commentator has written: "Sculptors in marble often sought to conceal the cracks in the stone by rubbing tinted wax in the tiny crevices. The inspectors would carefully examine the work of art, and if no such tactics had been employed, they would stamp it 'sine cera'."

PASSAGES OF SCRIPTURE

The words *sincere*, *sincerely* and *sincerity* are not often found in the Scriptures. Here are the passages in the Authorised Version: "**Now therefore fear the Lord, and serve him in *sincerity* and in truth: and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the flood, and in Egypt; and serve ye the Lord.**" (Joshua 24:14); "**Now therefore, if you have done truly and *sincerely*, in that you have made Abimelech king, and if you have dealt well with Jerubbaal and his house, and have done unto him according to the deserving of his hands...**" (Judges 9:16 & 19) "**Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of *sincerity* and truth.**" (1 Corinthians 5:8) "**For our rejoicing is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in simplicity and godly *sincerity*, not with fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God, we have had our conversation in the world, and more abundantly towards you.**" (2 Corinthians 1: 12) "**For we are not many who corrupt the word of God: but as of *sincerity*, but as of God, in the sight of God speak we in Christ.**" (2 Corinthians 2:17) "**I speak not by commandment, but by occasion of the forwardness of others, and to prove the *sincerity* of your love.**" (2 Corinthians 8:8) "**Grace be with all them that love our Lord Jesus Christ in *sincerity*. Amen.**" (Ephesians 6:24) "**...that you may approve things that are excellent; that you may be *sincere* and without offence till the day of Christ...**" (Philippians 1:10) "**The one preach Christ of contention, not *sincerely*, supposing to add affliction to my bonds...**" (Philippians 1:16). "**In all things showing yourself a pattern of good works: in doctrine showing uncorruptness, gravity, *sincerity*...**" (Titus 2:7) "**As newborn babes, desire the *sincere* milk of the word, that you may grow thereby.**" (1 Peter 2:2)

The Hebrew word used is *tamim* and the Greek words are *adolos* (1 Peter 2:2), guileless, pure; *gnesios* (2 Cor. 8:8), true, genuine, sincere; *eilikrines* (Phil.1:10), pure; *hagnos* (Phil.1: 16) denotes with pure motives; *eilikrinia* (1 Cor. 5:8; 2 Cor. 1:12; 2:17) denotes sincerity, purity; *Aphtharsia* (Eph. 6:24; Titus 2:7), incorruption.

THE PHILIPPIAN CHURCH

Paul's epistle to the Philippians is one of my favourite books of the Bible. I once spent a whole year studying it, which involved an analysis of every word and the reading of many commentaries. How Paul loved this congregation! Of course, Philippi is where Paul and Silas were thrown into prison (Acts 16:9-40). Two notable converts there were Lydia, the seller of purple, and the actual keeper of the prison. By the time Paul wrote his epistle to the Philippians, he was again in prison, this time in Rome. Paul looked for sincerity in the lives of his Philippian brethren (1:8). What exactly was he looking for? He wanted to see lives that did not have hidden faults glossed over; lives that were free from hypocrisy, deceit and trickery; saints who could be examined in the full glare of sunshine and who would meet the test when scrutinised and investigated.

SINCERITY / HYPOCRISY

So we see that sincerity is the antonym of hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is something Jesus condemned again and again during his ministry. A hypocrite is a stage-player, one who puts on an act. He is one who goes in for play-acting goodness, while all the time he conceals an evil heart. He thinks he can get away with it, but forgets that God sees his inner being, his very thoughts and motives. Jesus could condemn hypocrisy because he was the sincerest person who has ever lived. There was no sham or pretence about Him. For, after all, he was the perfect one, the sinless one, the Son of the living God. We must, therefore, take Him as our supreme example. We must strive to remove all hypocrisy from our lives and lead lives that are pure, holy and sincere.

To live such lives today will bring us into conflict with many in the world. But we must never forget that the standards of the world are not the standards of God. People might well laugh at us and think we are weak, fragile and feeble. But we soon learn that this is, in fact, a good description of our opponents. We in Christ are the ones who, in the end, can prove to be morally and spiritually strong, healthy and robust. We possess the Spirit of Christ and He is able to carry us through the trials and temptations that will inevitably come our way. Satan, of course, is out to destroy us. He wants to turn us from purity to wickedness, holiness to sinfulness, sincerity to hypocrisy. He will try everything to achieve his ends. He will pull out all the stops to win us back to his dark and damnable kingdom. But we will have none of it. We know that greater is He who is in us than he who is in the world (1 John 4:4) Satan's days are numbered and hell is prepared for him and his angels (Matthew 25:41).

So, when we next write to someone and close by saying "sincerely yours", may we all think of the actual meaning of the adverb. Let us pray to God that we may **"be sincere and without offence till the day of Christ, being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God."** (Philippians 1:10b - 11)

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 (1)

(Brian J Boland)

In spite of having lived around 3,500 years ago Balaam has much to teach us today. Not only has God remained unchanged but so has human nature. It is proposed, in a series of short articles, to review the warnings that we are given from Balaam's life. These are as just as pertinent today as when Moses issued them to the Children of Israel when Balaam was alive. Balaam was not an Israelite, but one whose

origins lay from Aram-nahrin (Massoretic text and the Pershitta, the text of the Eastern Church) i.e. Mesopotamia (Septuagint) (**Deuteronomy 23.4**). This was the home of Abraham (**Genesis 24.4; 10**) and the home of the Ammonites who submitted to David. (**Psalms 60; 1 Chronicles 19.6**) A pagan then in Jewish eyes, but nevertheless was used by God to teach others of Himself.

BALAAM'S HISTORICAL RECORD

The Bible refers to Balaam some 60 times with several other references in the apocryphal books. The Church Fathers in the first 300 years of Christianity also talk about him. In spite of this modern critics have put doubt on his existence as a real person. However in recent years archaeological finds, in particular the one at Deir Alla in Jordan of a plaster text dating around the seventh –eighth century BC have supported the scriptural account. It opens with "Warnings from the book of Balaam the son of Beor" The text is similar to that found in **Numbers 22-24**. These finds are discussed in *Biblical Archaeologist: Volumes 45-47* Durham, NC: American Schools of Oriental Research) 1996. Some scholars have also put in doubt the whole series of biblical events between Israel leaving Egypt and entering the promised land; but an authority on ancient languages of the area, Professor Krahmalkov says that the events tabled by Moses were in fact an official, heavily used Egyptian record (*Biblical Archaeological Review Sept 1994*) so confirming **Numbers 33.2 "Moses wrote down their starting places, stage by stage, by command of the Lord" (ESV).**

The plaster inscription from Tell Deir 'Alla currently resides at the Amman Museum. It is impressively displayed across from a copy of the Moabite Stone and next to the Copper Scroll from Qumran. The 1000+ fragments of the ancient inscription are arranged in order in modern plaster and securely encased in. It tells of the experience of a man named *bl m brb r*, who is called a 'seer of the gods' this is the same man spoken of in **Numbers 22-24** and elsewhere in the Bible. (His name is commonly given as **Balaam, son of Beor, (ESC Numbers 22.50)** In the Deir 'Alla text, Balaam is visited at night by the gods (*'lhn*) and he sees a vision) after which the gods speak to him and give him a message. We are then told that Balaam "got up the next day" From the context we conclude that the significant communication Balaam receives from the gods must have been disclosed to him in the vision that he relays to his people later in the extant text. The vision and message devastate Balaam. He arises the next day and cries passionately. His people come up to him and ask him why he is crying and fasting. In response, Balaam tells them what the gods have done and are going to do. Is it not remarkable that the events of 3,500 years ago can be relied upon as dealing with real people at real places to give us real warnings on how we should live our lives today? The time these folk lived was when Stonehenge was in use, when Athens had not long been founded and the civilisations of Iran and India were just beginning to emerge. The nations of Phoenicia and Assyria were also still to become an influence in the world.

Let us never forget that God is to judge those that do not fear him (**Matthew 13.49; Micah 3.5**) –and also of **Micah 3.6 (ESV)**:-

FOR I THE LORD DO NOT CHANGE

The Growing Church 3

The Gifted Church

(Alastair Ferrie, Dundee)

In this third article in the series concerning the Growing Church, we continue our study of Eph 4. We come in this article to the concept of the **Gifted Church**. The assumption in religious circles in the latter half of the 20th Century and beginning years of the 21st Century would be that such a title means that we are going to be talking about speaking in tongues... and this is not what we are talking about at all. The whole discussion about the gifts of the Spirit is in fact a red herring in terms of Church growth and Church advancement today. Yes there were some spiritual gifts given to the early Church but that was limited, it was temporary, it was imperfect; now that the perfect has come the imperfect has been done away.

But in the best tradition of Chris Tarrant in Who Wants to be a Millionaire we say, "I don't want to give you that", I want to give you far more. In fact as we see in the very next chapter, Paul declares that these gifts were temporary and about to disappear. (1 Cor. 13:8-13)

These gifts were not meant to be a permanent blessing to the Church but only a temporary blessing because God had not put in place the fulness of His Word which would be the major source of blessing and guidance in the Christian age then dawning.

In Eph 4 we find a gifted Church. A Church which is blessed by gifts from God which will help it in a million ways to be what it was always meant to be. Take some time to read Eph 4:7-16.

A. Grace Given to Each of Us.

Focus first of all on v7-8 and note that the gifts come from Him who ascended. Jesus of course is the one who ascended and is now seated at the right hand of the Majesty on high. (**Heb 1:3-4. Jn 3:13-15. Acts 2:29-36.**)

His gifts were for the Church... These gifts come from Him who ascended up into heaven and now sits at the Father's right hand. But what we note in particular from v7-8 was that His gifts of grace were for EACH of them. No one would be missed out in this distribution of the grace of God by which He is going to accomplish the growing Church. Each individual would receive of the grace of God for the greater good of the Church as a whole.

In the parable told by Jesus, we find that the Lord is likened to a man going on a journey leaving servants behind. And to each He gave talents, to each according to their ability to use these talents in the service of their Master. There is some

argument concerning whether these should be regarded as opportunities for service, since the word "talent" refers to a quantity of money entrusted to the servant. And yet the fortunate unintended pun does add something to our understanding, for the Lord does indeed entrust us with abilities and talents to be used in His service. And as we look at that passage in Matt 25 in some detail what do we find? (Matt 25:14-30) What do we notice?

- **That each servant received some talents to be used by the Master.** In other words we find that the Church is a gifted Church because each individual member has gifts to be used in the service of the Master.
- **The growing Church is one where the gifts of each member are**
 - **Valued**
 - **Used**

for the benefit of the Church as a whole.

- The Church has a huge untapped reservoir of abilities and talents that under normal circumstances is not being used.

And the Church is the poorer as a result. It is not as God intended. God intended the growing Church to benefit from the input and ability, resource and talent of every member. This is the growing Church.

B. Gifts of Godly Leadership.

The second point we see is that the Church has the wonderful gift of spiritual leadership to help it to grow. Indeed this is the area where most of the designed benefits of God are seen.

- ***"And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers,..."***
- **As we look at this list we see that the Lord intended blessing the Church, helping the Church to grow by giving it certain key players who would enhance the experience of the Church for everyone and encourage it to grow.**
- **These are spoken of here as the gift of God to the Church!**

Sometimes we use that phrase tongue and cheek. There are times in the Church when there are brethren who are a little too much in love with themselves. And at times there are preachers who are too much in love with the sound of their own voice and their own star quality. These prima donnas of the pulpit are the curse of the Church. We say of someone who thinks a little too much of himself.. he thinks he's God's gift! ***But in this passage we see that there are certain leaders of the Church that quite literally God planned should be God's gift to the Church. They would not be so by being prima donnas who strutted their stuff before congregations but by providing what God intended they should provide for the Church!***

Look at what God says He has provided to bless and help the Church to grow.

- ***apostles,***
- ***prophets,***
- ***evangelists,***
- ***pastoring-teachers,***

Now look at what these people are all designed to bring about. They are all concerned with the feeding of the flock, the guiding of the flock in the pathway to God.

- Apostles were inspired of God to deliver and record the gospel message for the Church.
- Prophets were inspired with the message of truth for the Church because they had no written Word completed to help them.
- Evangelists were heralds of the gospel message.
- Pastoring-teachers were shepherds of the flock, elders in the Church who know the Way of Christ, who live the Way of Christ and hence can bless the Church by leading them in that way.

These leaders are vital to the Church!

- **Spiritual leadership is probably the one greatest need in the Church of today!**

We have the Word and that is vital, a precious gift from God. But these other gifts from God are designed to help the Church to grow as well. These functions are necessary if the Church is to grow. (***Heb 13:7-8. Heb 13:17. 1 Cor 4:15-16. 1 Cor 11:1.***)

These leaders will be vital to the Church if it is to be a growing Church. Spiritual leadership can make or break the effectiveness of the Church in growing as it ought.

It is clear that leadership is for

- **Those who are committed to Christ**
- **Those who are dedicated to the Church of Christ**
- **Those who are spiritual**
- **Those who have walked with God**
- **Those who can lead others in the way of God.**

And this is God's gift to the Church. To have such spiritual men will bring limitless blessing to the Church and bring many souls to Christ and lead many souls to the safe harbour.

C. Each member a conduit for blessing each other.

The last point is one that is in the text but it is not so clear in the English translation and so has to be watched for carefully. Every time someone develops a new approach to soul winning we have countless workshops supporting the new method and extravagant claims are made for it. We need to be careful not to imply that it is our methods that cause growth. We only plant seed. God brings growth. (1 Cor 3:6)

It is good to study new methods of seed planting, but far more important is to study how we better provide an environment which is conducive to healthy growth and acknowledge that God does the rest.

"That which every joint supplies...." This could be translated "every contact".

This indicates that every Christian is part of the vital system that provides nourishment to the body. We cannot be properly fortified and strengthened without the spiritual nourishment that each and every member supplies. There is no such thing as an unimportant member in the body of Christ. If every member is part of the Body of Christ, and so interconnected with every other member it follows that nourishment and blessing comes through other parts of the body to us and through us to other parts of the Body. The tragedy is that there is sometimes a certain amount of **nerve damage** in the Body of Christ and this prevents blessings flowing from one member to another the way that they ought to flow.

Can you see what a vital difference this makes to the growing Church? The growing Church is one where every member is sustaining every other member. No matter what their gift is, flowing from the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, they have that gift to bless others in the body and they become the conduit for the blessings of God to be disseminated throughout the body. You are a channel of blessing! And of course the converse is true... if we are not sustaining one another we do not have the growing Church.

The body cannot be fortified as it should be until every member is equipped to do his/her part in allowing the nourishment received from Christ to benefit the body as a whole! Each of us fits in a special place in the Body, and each supplies an essential link of nourishment without which the Church cannot grow as it should.

Have you ever smashed a finger or hand in a door? Have you notice the reaction of the body? Instantaneous! Every part works to heal the hurt of one small member.

- **No committee meetings are held.**
- **No accusations are made like, what was the hand thinking of, being in that door-jamb in the first place!** Serves it right... if it hadn't been in the doorway it wouldn't have got hurt.
- **The mouth sucks the sore finger,**
- **The other hand caresses it,**
- **The feet carry it to where it can be rinsed in cold water, and so on.**
- **The body reacts to heal the hurt!**

When the Church reacts in this way to the hurt of each and every member, it is functioning as Christ desires. It provides the right environment for healthy growth to occur.

- **Love is the only environment in which the Church can grow.**

Each member is a conduit for blessing each other. When this is the environment of the local Church... we have a growing Church.



Foundations of the Faith

*A series of studies into the foundational truths
of the Christian Faith*

THE DEITY OF CHRIST (Robert Marsden, Wigan)

WHO ARE YOU?

Ever since Jesus the Christ was born into the world people have debated his precise nature. The questions have been asked, "What sort of man is this that even wind and sea obey him," was the response of the disciples when Jesus stilled the waves. The soldiers at the foot of the cross sarcastically cried, "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." John records that the Jews exclaimed to Jesus in apparent frustration, "Who are you?" as Jesus somewhat enigmatically revealed his purpose. The Gnostics, Stoics, Epicureans and others developed their own philosophies about the true nature of Jesus and Godhood.

And so the debate has continued throughout the centuries. The Oxford History of Christianity records that during the 4th century AD, the focus of attention in Easter Christianity was the theology of the Trinity. It records that the Council of Nicaea in AD325 "repudiated the view of Arius (an Alexandrian priest) that God the Son is fundamentally inferior to God the Father," and declares that Christ 'is one in essence' with the Father. The same book records that later the debate centred on the person of Christ and records that for around 250 years from AD431 the main question asked was, "If Christ is true God, in what sense is he also authentically human?" Similar debates have continued ever since and even today with all the benefit of learning there are still many shades of opinion about the true nature of Jesus. Rarely, if ever, can the essential nature of one person, have generated so much discussion.

EMMANUEL, GOD WITH US

Our title refers to the **Deity** of Christ. Yet the Bible never speaks directly of the Deity of Christ or for that matter the Deity of God. It is unsurprising that this should be the case, because by definition God is deity. It is unnecessary to speak of the deity of God, because if God is God, then he is by definition deity. Similarly with Christ, if Christ is God, then he too is by definition deity (and the same argument would hold equally true of the Holy Spirit). The Godhead – Father, Son and Spirit – is, then, a Deity. I think readers will acknowledge that being partly deity, or almost deity, is quite simply not an option.

Over the next several days, the sound of choirs will once again be heard joyously reminding us of the foretold coming of Jesus.

**"For to us a child is born, unto us a son is given;
and the government will be upon his shoulder,
and his name will be called
"Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.""**

In sermons and nativity plays, many will read again the 'Christmas Story' and be reminded of the prophecy of Isaiah, the words of which are recorded again by Matthew, **"Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel** (which means *God with us*). Speaking of the coming salvation of the Lord, Isaiah says, **"A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.""** John also makes reference to the prophecy of Isaiah, who, spoke of the glory of God filling the temple and the seraphim calling to each other, **"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory."** John makes clear whose glory Isaiah had seen – Jesus!

I AND THE FATHER ARE ONE

It is not our purpose here to 'prove' that Jesus is God. His own words, the words of the prophets, the record of the apostles and the testimony of the Father are perfectly adequate in that respect. After Jesus had healed, on the Sabbath, the man who had been ill for 38 years and who lay by pool of Bethsaida, the man went away and told the Jews that Jesus had healed him. Challenged and persecuted by the Jews for healing on the Sabbath, Jesus told them, **"My Father is working still, and I am working."** (John 5:17) The Jews apparently fully understood the implications of Jesus' statement, the implicit association with the Father and therefore his own deity, because John records in the next verse, **"This was why the Jews sought all the more to kill him, because he not only broke the Sabbath but also called God his own Father, making himself equal with God."** At the feast of the Dedication in Jerusalem, Jesus was once again upbraided by the Jews, **"If you are the Christ, tell us plainly."** (John 10:24) Once again Jesus associates himself intimately with the Father and once again the Jews were unable to accept the clear statement of Jesus, **"I and the Father are one."** Preparing to stone Jesus he enquired of them the nature of the good work for which they stoned him. **"It is not for a good work that we stone you but for blasphemy; because you, being a man, make yourself God."** (John 10:33)

Jesus' answer to this charge is just as relevant today as it was then; it is just as foundational to our faith now as it was then. If Jesus is not who he claims to be, the Son of God, then do not believe him. But if the works that he does speak of his Sonship and identify him as the Son of God, then believe the works. **"..but if I do them (the works of the Father), even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father."** (John 10:38) Even today this compelling invitation to interrogate the words, actions and claims of Jesus holds good and the genuine enquirer will surely be moved to acknowledge the consistency and integrity of his life.

THE TESTIMONY OF HIS LIFE

Throughout his manifestation in the flesh, Jesus displayed all of the attributes of deity. Twice in his letter to the faithful brethren at Colossae, Paul is moved to express of Christ that, **"In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,"** (1:19) and **"In him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily...."** (2:9) He performed miracles, healed the sick, revealed to people what he had no right physically to know, showed his authority over nature and most gloriously of all, in full view of the Jews who mourned the death of Lazarus, he demonstrated his Almighty power when he raised his friend from the dead. Only deity could, as Jesus did on many occasions, and perhaps most poignantly at the raising of Lazarus, promise the ultimate gift of eternal life. **"I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die."** (Luke 11:25)

During the throes of his mock trial, even Pontius Pilate had to admit, "I find no crime in this man." Luke records that even after Jesus had been interrogated by Herod (where he was treated with contempt, mocked and arrayed in gorgeous apparel) he was sent back to Pilate whose judgement was, "I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges against him." Of course he was not guilty. How could he be 'guilty' of speaking the absolute truth about himself and his relationship with the Father?

THE REALITY OF JESUS, SON OF GOD

There is inevitably much more to be said, but consider for a moment the truly awesome (and I use that word wholly appropriately in this context) implications of the deity of Jesus. If Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us then,

It was God the Son who atoned for sin;

It was God the Son who was the propitiatory sacrifice for sin;

It was God the Son who stripped and stooped to wash his disciples feet as an example of service;

It was God the Son who was mocked, spat upon and humiliated at his 'trial';

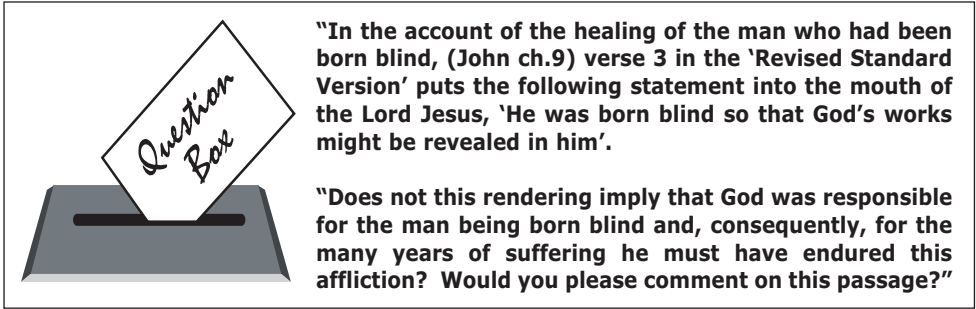
It was God the Son who was flogged and had the crown of thorns plaited on his head;

It was God the Son who hung on the cross between two criminals;

It was God the Son who, at the behest of the Father, carried the burden of sin to Calvary.

Humbling? Can it really be true that God loves us this much? Yes! Did deity really dwell in the flesh and suffer all manner of injustice and indignity? Yes! Did deity really take upon his own shoulders the whole burden of sin? Yes! Can it really be true that such overwhelming, sacrificial and unconditional love is extended to sinful humanity? YES!! Let John sum up the glorious reality of the deity of Christ. **"And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, to know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life."** (1 John 5:20)

THE QUESTION



I have no doubt that this particular statement has troubled a great many Christians who also have found difficulty in reconciling it with their belief in a loving, caring God. But I suspect that if they hope to find a version of the New Testament, which offers a more acceptable rendering, they are likely to be very disappointed.

- The 'New International Version' offers us, "*This has happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life*".
- The 'Living Bible' tells us that the man was born blind "*to demonstrate the power of God*".
- The 'New American Standard Version' also states that it was "*in order that the works of God might be displayed in him*".
- The 'New King James Version' reads, "*that the works of God should be revealed in his life*".
- And the 'Authorized Version reads, "*that the works of God should be made manifest in him*". In fact, none of the many translations and commentaries that I have checked offers us anything very different.

So what are we to make of this passage?

THE CONTEXT

Well, let us first put this puzzling verse into its proper context.

John 9 records that it was the Lord's own disciples who drew his attention to this blind man, probably as he sat at the place in the Jerusalem, where he was accustomed to eke out a living by begging. The comments in verses 8 and 9 make it obvious that he was a quite familiar figure in the city, and that it was common knowledge that he had been blind from birth. The disciples certainly knew about the man, as the question they put to the Lord reveals. Verse 2, **"Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?"**

We can accept, I am sure, as understandable, the disciples' suggestion that the man may have been born with this grave handicap as the consequence of sin committed by his parents, because even today, children frequently come into the world suffering physical or mental disability as the result of the reckless lifestyle of their parents. But in their question, they also implied that the man might have been born blind because he had *personally* sinned *before* he came into the world; in other words, in a pre-existent state, and this is not an idea with which you and I are familiar, nor is it one that we can accept, because it is not even suggested anywhere in the entire Bible.

It was, however, a belief held by certain Jews in the time of Jesus, the Essenes, for example, and also found in the 'Cabbala', which contains mystical Jewish interpretations of the Old Testament scriptures, along with ancient Jewish traditions. The Lord's disciples apparently had heard about the theory; hence their question. I am personally struck by the fact that;

- a) his disciples believed that Jesus was able to answer their question, even though to know the innermost details of the lives of the man's parents would imply supernatural power; and,
- b) that he was capable of pronouncing on the man's personal behaviour in some real or imaginary 'pre-birth' existence!

THE LORD'S RESPONSE

We see, however, that the Lord firmly – almost curtly - dismissed the question and the notion it expressed. He declined to discuss the subject with them, because the problem of sickness and suffering in human life cannot be resolved or explained as easily as the disciples seemed to suppose.

They asked, "Whothis man or his parents?"

He replied, "Neither.....this man or his parents!"

"Who?" "Neither!"

1. Notice that the Lord did not say that the parents were *sinless*. He simply said that, in this particular case, neither sin that they may have committed, nor sin committed by the man himself, had anything to do with his having been born blind.
2. Nor did the Lord deny that sin, which is either failure or refusal to live in harmony with the will of God, is, in fact, the root cause of all human suffering. Rom.5: 12 tells us how sin came into the world and what its consequence has been ever since.
3. Instead, he declared that he had a mission to fulfil. By submitting to the will of the Father who sent him, he must deal conclusively with the cause of the world's sickness, suffering and death, by dealing with the world's sin.

AN EXPLANATION OF THE VERSE

It is my personal view, that in verse 3 the translators have misunderstood the Lord's response. As I have shown, many translations suggest that the man had been born blind, so that a miracle could be performed on him, in order to reveal and demonstrate the power of God.

But we must bear in mind the very important fact that the original language in which the New Testament was written, like other ancient languages, did not have a system of punctuation marks as we have in our own language. There were no 'full-stops' or 'commas', etc., in N.T. Greek, and the way in which translators chose to punctuate a passage has often influenced its meaning.

Look again at John 9:3 again and notice the full stop that has been placed at the end of that verse. Now, if we move the full stop and place it after the word '*parents*', and then read on without a break into the next verse, you will see the very significant difference that is made. This is how it reads: -

"Neither this man nor his parents.

But that the works of God may be manifested in him I must work the works of

Him who sent me while it is day; the night cometh when no man can work”.

Do you see how briefly Jesus dealt with their two-part question? He dismissed it in just six words! He declined to discuss any theory as to the cause of the man’s blindness and summarily dismissed the subject, stressing, instead, the real and more urgent purpose of his ministry – a ministry that would fulfil the will of the Father.

The account of his life and ministry that we have recorded in the Gospels, reveal very clearly that the accomplishing of the purpose for which he came into the world, was always before him. Remember that the first thirty years of the life of Jesus are virtually hidden from us, and his actual ministry lasted for only about three years. Consequently, he was always fully aware that his time was limited. Verses 4 and 5 of John 9 reveal this. **“I must work the works of Him who sent me while it is day; night comes, when no-one can work”.** Even earlier, (John 5; 17), he had expressed the same profound sense of urgency, **“My Father is working still, and I am working”.**

Furthermore, the fulfilment of his ministry, culminating in his sacrificial death, was something about which he spoke on several occasions and which he described as *‘My hour’*. At the beginning of his ministry when he performed his first miracle at Cana in Galilee, he said to Mary, who apparently hoped he would do something that would reveal his true identity, **“My hour has not yet come”** (John 2:4)

Near the end of his ministry, in John 12, shortly before he shared the Passover with his disciples before instituting his own Supper, he said, (v.23), **“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified’**. At verse 27 of the same chapter we read that he asked, **“... what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour? No! For this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify thy Name!”**

CONCLUSION

We should not look to the story in John 9 for an explanation of the problem of human suffering. This has to be sought in other New Testament passages; and, even then, it is unlikely that we shall find a solution that is completely satisfactory.

What we can say, on the basis of that passage, is that God did not cause this man’s affliction whatever may have been the reason for His blindness. Nowhere in the scriptures are we taught that God directly causes sickness or suffering. On the contrary, in Luk.13: 16 Jesus declared that a woman whom he healed of a physical disability had been ‘bound for eighteen years’ by Satan. Her condition was not the work of God, but of Satan.

And even Paul, the apostle, writing about the ‘thorn in the flesh’ from which he prayed to God three times for release, described his own affliction as ‘a messenger of Satan’. The Lord’s response to their question must surely have brought the disciples back from the misty realm of surmise and speculation, to the world of hard, painful reality, in which the distressing effects of sin could everywhere be seen, by reminding them that he had a work to perform and a death to die, in order to make it possible for God to offer all mankind a full redemption and, finally, a total healing when the consequences of sin are removed for ever.

Questions to; Frank Worgan, 11, Stanier Road, Corby, Northants. NN17 1XP

News and Information

Ghana Appeal

We again express our appreciation for your donations for the Lord's work in Ghana. This has enabled brethren to receive good medical attention when adequate funds were not available and also helped our zealous brethren to evangelise further.

A brother acting as preacher and secretary in a church has a brain tumour, which needs urgent attention. Can we provide the funds to save him? Another brother has head pains that need investigating.

Christians need Bible study in order to grow. We continue to hear of enthusiasm for the one-week seminar and to receive requests for study material, including two for concordances. There is a hunger for the Word that deserves to be satisfied with good study material, not only for personal spiritual growth and understanding but also to help pass the Word to others. We can see the zeal for this in the number of baptisms and of new congregations, as well as meeting places being erected in villages.

Those wishing to contribute, please make cheques payable to:

Dennyloanhead Church of Christ Ghana Fund and send to the treasurer:

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

Nigeria Appeal

Thanks to the generosity of the brethren who contributed to the fund last year we have been able to support in a small way three evangelists in Nigeria. They are very appreciative of the help given and have been able to start other small churches in neighbouring areas as well as strengthening the church in their own area. The churches continue to grow in number for which we can only praise God. Nigeria is very fertile ground for the word of God. We have just heard this month of another three being baptised in one congregation two of whom were Muslims

It took many months due to the Nigerian postal system to be able to select and get references for the brothers to be supported. We have restricted it to three in the first instance in order to make the best use of the money donated.

Our main outreach continues to be the provision of Bibles. It appears that very few new Christians in Nigeria have a complete Bible (We have just heard from a church that has 200 members and only 60 Bibles between them). We now have a source that will provide 16 Bibles for the sum of £38.40 including postage to Nigeria (Average £2.40 a Bible). That is a considerable saving on previous providers.

We thank you for your support over the last year.

Anyone wishing to contribute to this fund should make cheques payable to "Church of Christ Stretford" and forward to **J Purcell, 3 Dale Avenue, Bramhall, Stockport SK7 2JP**. If the contribution

is to be specifically for the support of evangelists then please indicate that.

John & Margery Purcell

Baptism

We rejoice at the baptism into Christ of Joanna Ashurst on Sunday, 26th October 2003.

Joanna is the 9 year old daughter of Stephen and Abigail Ashurst in whose home a Church of Christ in Buxton meet.

We are grateful to the Church at Eastwood for hosting the baptism.

Allan Ashurst.

Coming Events

FELLOWSHIP WEEKEND Longshoot, Wigan

May 2004

Bi-ennial Fellowship Weekend is to be held over weekend of Friday, April 30th to Monday, May 3rd 2004. A full programme

of events will be announced in due course. But you can be assured of a weekend of excellent teaching and fellowship.

REMEMBER THE NOBODIES

Let's Remember the Nobodies! A woman was in a store looking for a birthday card with just a general message, but all she could find were cards specifically for mum, dad, husband, wife, etc. Finally she turned to the assistant. "These cards are all for somebody. Haven't you any for nobody?"

I suppose we've all been buying cards for somebody at this festive season, and we've received them too. But action groups like Oxfam and Christian Aid keep reminding us of the need of the nobodies, the boys and girls we don't know, who will die if we don't dig deep into our pockets. Jesus said "Don't just give to those who give to you." Let's remember the nobodies, God knows them!

*Quiet now...
Close the minds door
on business of the day
And for this brief moment
Clear the way for God*

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