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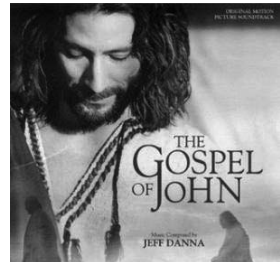
October, 2006

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

Understanding the Life of Jesus "Before Abraham was, I am."

(Robert Marsden, Wigan)

Over the past months we have been studying the significance of 'events' in the life of Jesus and looking at their historical significance in the context of the ongoing confrontations that Jesus had, in particular, with the Jewish religious authorities. This month's study does not qualify as an 'event', but is nevertheless important because it relates to some of the most important teaching that Jesus ever gave.



Jewish scepticism about Jesus

In John 20: 30, 31 the purpose of this record is clearly stated: **"that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name."** The primary target audience is the Jews and Jesus needs to overcome their scepticism about his nature and persuade them that he is the Messiah. One of the key elements of this process is the relentless way in which Jesus identifies himself with God the Father. From the outset of his public ministry this had been a key message and when Jesus rid the Temple of the traders in the Temple precinct he, quite deliberately, said: **"Take these things away; you shall not make my Father's house a house of trade"** (emphasis mine). Through the act of clearing the traders out of the Temple, Jesus had laid claim, through his Sonship relationship to the Father, to the focal point of Jewish worship. The theme of 'fatherhood' is to be at the forefront of these latest discussions with his Jewish hearers and once again Jesus is to be confronted with the question that, so far as these hearers were concerned, the answer was unpalatable – Who are you? (John 8:25)

Contents: 1-Understanding the Life of Jesus; 4-Aspects of Living; 6-Question Box; 8-The Seven Letters; 10-Season of Loneliness; 13-Chennai Report; 16-News & Info.

We have also seen in a number of incidents, notably those involving the woman of Samaria, the healing at the pool of Bethesda and during his discourse as the bread of life, that Jesus has sought to establish in their minds his supremacy over one of the great iconic leaders of their faith – Moses. In this situation Jesus takes on another challenge by speaking of himself in comparison to Abraham, the acknowledged father of the Jewish faith and the person from whom all Jews have descended. In all of these ways Jesus is challenging the Jews to confront their history and understand that, in Him, they are in fact seeing the fulfilment of all that had been prophesied about the Messiah.

Jesus is from the Father

This particular discourse with the Jews is all about identity and, as noted before, stems from Jesus' claim to be the light of the world. In summary, the discussion goes like this (John 8: 13-25):

- The Jews insist that as Jesus is testifying to himself (about being the light of the world) his testimony is not valid;
- Jesus retorts that as they don't really know him they have no right to question his testimony; besides, he tells them, he has the Father with him, who also bears testimony to him, so his testimony is valid even by their rules because it is given by two people;
- The Jews then question Jesus about the identity of his father, and Jesus tells them that as they don't recognise him (Jesus) for who he is, then they wouldn't recognise his Father either even if he told them;
- Jesus tells the Jews that unless they recognise Him as Messiah, the Son of God, they will die in their sins (this would of course be a serious affront to them);
- Jesus marks out His credentials:
 - > He is from above, they are from below;
 - > They are of this world, he isn't;With both of these statements Jesus is saying something very important about his identity and deity.
- The Jews ask Jesus the "Who are you" question.

Jesus foretells his death

At the end of this particular part of the discussion Jesus makes one of those comments that is so difficult to square with the thought that some express that, such was Jesus' trauma in the Garden of Gethsemane, that he might just conceivably have 'walked away' from his mission and that of his Father. Jesus said to the Jews: **"When you have lifted up the Son of man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority but speak thus as the Father taught me"** (8:28). Not only is Jesus once more identifying himself with the Father, but he is clearly stating both the fact and the nature of his sacrificial death. **When** (not if) ...you will know that I am he... John 12:32 records the same sentiment from Jesus in a narrative that starts, as Jesus contemplates his immediate future: **"Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father save me from this hour?' No, for this purpose I have come to this hour."** Jesus goes on then to say: **"and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself."** It is my contention that Jesus simply could not have made these statements if there was any doubt at all about the fulfilment of his mission.

Children of Abraham?

Interestingly Jesus addresses his next words to those Jews who, according to John's

record, as Jesus had been speaking, 'had believed in him' (or 'had put their faith in him' as the NIV records). Strikingly, by the time Jesus had finished speaking these same people (or so it appears from the narrative) **"took up stones to throw at him"**. Whatever their initial belief or faith was based on it didn't seem capable of dealing with the words that Jesus spoke. The crux of this latest discussion is this:

- Jesus tells them that they need to be his disciples and that he (and only he), the Son, will set them free (from sin);
- The Jews counter that as descendants of Abraham they have never been slaves and have always been free;
- Jesus acknowledges that they are Abraham's descendants, but says that as he is speaking the words of his Father, so they are doing, in trying to kill him, what they have seen from their father; the twist is that Jesus is now telling them that whilst they may be physically descended from Abraham, they are 'spiritually' the children of the devil;
- The Jews then claim God as their Father, to which Jesus retorts that if that were the case, they would love him because he is from the Father;
- Jesus issues this damning indictment: **"You are of your father the devil; and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him"** (v44). Because they won't listen to Jesus, they are not of God.

One can only guess that whatever 'belief in him' some of the Jews had started to have, Jesus perceived that it was pretty flimsy. Were the harsh words that Jesus spoke then a test to establish the real depth of that belief. It certainly seems that their belief evaporated very quickly as Jesus told them that he was the only source of salvation from sin. Jesus laid waste to their claims to be true spiritual descendants of Abraham and the response of the Jews was now to resort to name calling – calling Jesus a Samaritan, a mad one at that and demon-possessed.

"Before Abraham was, I am"

Finally Jesus adds yet another startling claim to all of those that he has already confronted them with. Now he starts to talk about eternity both in relation to his own nature and the eternal life that is bestowed on believers in him. **"Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death"** (v51). And still his hearers just didn't get it. As one reads John's narrative you can almost hear the scorn in the comments of the Jews. Abraham died, the prophets died and you are talking about never tasting death. Are you claiming to be greater than Abraham and greater than the prophets? Who do you claim to be? And Jesus reverts to the theme that so many of these studies have concentrated on: "it is my Father who glorifies me". It is always the Father. I know him, Jesus tells them. In effect Jesus is saying to them that though they claim God as their Father, if that were true they would recognise the manifestation of God, Jesus, standing and talking amongst them. Yet their intention is to kill him. But the coup de grace is yet to come.

"Your father Abraham rejoiced that he was to see my day; he saw it and was glad." What! You aren't even fifty years old and now you are claiming to have seen Abraham! To which Jesus makes that remarkable affirmation in a statement that says everything about his true nature, his pre-existence, his deity, his status as God the Son, as he lays down the ultimate challenge to all of their preconceptions about him. **"Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am."** May we never ourselves forget that it is in the eternal nature of God the Father, and His Son, that our eternal hope lies.

Aspects of Living

GOD

(The fifth in a series of previously unpublished essays on Aspects of Living from the writings of Alf Marsden, deceased)

Can there be much doubt that every person will hear about God? To the Muslim, He is Allah; to the Jew, He is Jehovah; to the Christian, He is God. To the non-believer, there is still a sense of a higher being. Who is God, anyway? Is he a 'super-god' who is greater than all the gods that men have ever worshipped? Is he a kind of sci-fi overlord lurking somewhere in outer space with other of his creations to deal with, so that at times he seems not to hear **our** imprecations? What are our thoughts about God, and what do we make of the Godhead?

The Uncreated God

In our quest for understanding, we first have to grapple with the thought that God, as Creator, was Himself uncreated. The book of Exodus records that when Moses grasped the unwelcome news that God wanted him to return to Egypt, he asked God to tell him what name he should give to the children of Israel as to who had sent him. In reply God said, **"I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you."** (Exodus 3:13,14) From this statement the reader concludes that God IS. Encompassed in this thought are the past, the present and the future. God IS now; He always has been; He always will be. Our finite minds are conditioned to the thought that if things ARE, then at sometime in the past someone or something must have made or created them. But in our contemplation of God, we have to accept a being who is uncreated and therefore eternal; timeless and, therefore, incapable of measurement in time; ineffable and therefore incapable of description by words; immutable and therefore incapable of change by us or any other person or any other thing. Is such a God too mind-bending for us to believe? For many millions of people the answer, sadly, is yes. And yet in times of great distress and anxiety, he is the one to whom people turn. What a strange paradox this is. It's as if, when we have to journey into the unknown, we need the presence and guidance of one who knows. Millions of people stretch out their hands to the One in whom, otherwise, they do not believe. Is this logical? Can God be available to us on a kind of 'time-share' basis?

God Incarnate

Then we have the problem of the Incarnation: the living embodiment of God in the flesh of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ of God. John says at the beginning of his gospel: **"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."** John goes on to say that this Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. If we accept the idea that God himself had no beginning, then the 'beginning' as stated by John would seem to refer back beyond the events of creation.

In Genesis 1, the Godhead is not specifically mentioned, but the idea is inherent in the text. We are told of God the Creator, the Spirit of God moving on the face of the waters, and God, speaking in the plural, **"Let us make man in our image"**. We take the plural as meaning that the Son, the Word, was present at the creation. John bears this out when he says, **"and without Him was not anything made that was made"** (1:3). This, then, gives us a picture of the Godhead in action in creation. In order to complete the great plan of God, it was necessary for the word to be made flesh so the He could dwell on earth in the likeness of sinful flesh. A spirit cannot

suffer physical death, nor can it shed blood, and both of these things were necessary for the salvation of mankind. So the stage was set for the mystery of the Incarnation. When Joseph would have put away Mary for her supposed infidelity, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a vision and said, **"Fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit"**. We have no reason to speculate as to how the seed was implanted in Mary; God is God, and He can accomplish anything according to His will. What we do know is that the birth of Jesus followed a normal pattern of pregnancy.

The fact of God's presence in Christ should, in my view, never be disputed. We have a Messianic prophecy in Isaiah 7:14 which says: **"Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Immanuel."** The same prophet goes on to say this of the child: **"For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace"** (9:6).

Over in the New Testament we find the birth of the child recorded, and the meaning of Immanuel is defined. Matthew records that the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph the husband of Mary, an appearance intended to quell Joseph's anxiety concerning Mary. The angel told Joseph that the child should be named Jesus: for he shall save his people from their sins. The Messianic prophecy of Isaiah is then repeated: **"Behold a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us."** (Matt 1: 18-25) The scripture here is its own interpreter; Jesus would be God with us. It is almost impossible to plumb the full depth of this statement, except to say what the scripture says of Jesus: **"In him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily."** (Col. 2:9)

The God of love

The believer has to make sense of what Jesus said during his ministry. On the one hand he says that the Father has sent him, which implies Christ on earth and God in heaven. On the other hand we have to accept that Jesus was the personification of the Godhead in his flesh, and we must also accept the Word's of John's gospel when he says "and the Word was God". There would seem to be no doubt whatever that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit would not in any way disagree about anything. What we have to remember, I think, when we try to understand divine intervention in human affairs, is that we are thinking about God who is omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent. We can only know, and perhaps imperfectly understand, what has been revealed to us. We can only attempt to grasp the Infinite with finite minds, but we do know that He who called everything into being can do whatever he wants and be wherever he wants to be. If we think of the Godhead at all, we think of people such as we are – limited in time and space. But when we think about Deity, we transcend time and space and are transported to ethereal realms, the grandeur of which we will not and cannot know until we find ourselves there, clothed in a spiritual body that God will give us. Even the phrase 'spiritual body' is confusing to us because of our association with our fleshly body.

Our God IS, and is many things but most of all He is a God of love; the scripture says that, "He so loved the world that He gave His only Son". His love is so great that He sacrificed Himself in the person of His Christ. It matters little to me whether people would say that this view is 'trinitarian' or any other appellation that may be given. I only know that I want my God to be a mighty God, an all-powerful God, and a God who holds the whole universe in His hands. I know that He loves me along with all those who come to Him through His Christ, and it is soul-enriching to know that we love Him. It is sweet to know that in His love He has conquered this world, which is beleaguered in sin. Praise be to Him!



QUESTION: (1) Prayer for Truth Seekers and (2) Letters of Commendation



I must open the Question Box with a humble apology to a dear sister who, months ago, wrote a letter that I have rediscovered in a pile of *answered* correspondence! I am very sorry for the oversight, and I shall now, rather belatedly, attempt to address the quite important issues her letter raises.

Prayer and Progress.

Our sister asks five questions, but, I am relieved to say, she has left me to decide which questions to use for the Question Box. I have, therefore, chosen to deal with the first and the fifth questions, and the first requires a simple answer. It asks: "*Should we pray more persistently that people will seek the truth?*"

My response must be to say that pray alone, no matter how persistent or passionate, is simply not enough to accomplish the purpose for which the Church exists.

I am reminded of an experience we had in Corby many years ago, when a husband and wife who claimed to be members of the Lord's Church, arrived from N. Ireland with their children and needed both accommodation and financial help. Because we had an excellent relationship with the local Housing Office, we were able to obtain a house for them, and the Corby church provided financial help and furniture.

We were surprised and disappointed, however, when no member of the family ever attended a single meeting of the Church. When they were visited, the church-visitors were informed that, although the family never came to worship, they '*prayed for the church every day!*' This prompted the response, "*If every member of the Corby congregation merely 'prayed for the Church every day', and stayed at home, the Church would not survive for very long!*"

Prayer is good; it is essential. But prayer alone, like faith alone, when it comes to spreading the Truth, is dead. Taking this a step farther let me add that I fear that in these days many congregations are merely 'keeping house for the Lord'. We are holding regular services, singing, praying, and furnishing the Lord's Table, giving our 'mites', listening to some unremarkable sermons, the like of which might be heard in a denominational service, and doing little else!

In some cases there may be understandable reasons why this is so, but the fact remains that very little 'outreach' is taking place. What we need in these admittedly difficult times is much more positive evangelistic activity. C.H. Spurgeon is reported to have exclaimed, "*Ye men of Plymouth! Why stand ye gazing up into Heaven? Get on with your work!*" If we *worked* more, perhaps the Lord would excuse us if we *prayed* less.

'Letters of Commendation'

Question 5 raises the subject of church autonomy and, to use her words: '*the way in which churches will accept members from other congregations without any check on their behaviour.*'

Her letter reveals that she is troubled by the fact that congregations are sometimes prepared to receive into membership individuals who come to them, come from sister congregations, without showing respect for, and courtesy towards, the congregations from whence they come, by first establishing that the new-comers are brethren in good standing, thus acting in an orderly and scriptural manner.

For a people who claim to wish to '*restore the church of the New Testament*' – (at least, that is what I heard preached, as a young Christian over 70 years ago, although I have heard precious little of such preaching for a long time!) - we have adopted a very slack attitude in the matter inter-congregational communication, particularly in the matter of receiving people into fellowship.

In New Testament Times.

It seems clear, from a reading of the scriptures, that the New Testament Church was familiar with the use of what are described as '*letters of commendation*'. These were letters commonly carried by those

who had occasion to move about the Roman world of that time, and similar letters were used in Judaism when men were commissioned to tasks on behalf of the Priesthood or Sanhedrin.

Let me say at this point, that such letters were not required by divine command, but, as E.H.Plumtre, the highly regarded commentator states: "*The 'letters of commendation' deserve notice as an important element in the organisation of the early church*", and, as such, they were obviously regarded as a very effective expedient in maintaining good order among the congregations.

‘The Known’

1. Of course, there were times when the character and reputation of the one seeking to be received into the fellowship by a particular congregation, was so *well-known* that identification was unnecessary, as in Paul’s own case, mentioned in 2nd.Cor. 3:1.

Read the context and you will see that men had come from Jerusalem to Corinth, carrying what they claimed were ‘letters of commendation’ from the Judean leadership – probably the apostles, or the elders. Paul declared that, where he was concerned, the Corinthians needed no letter of commendation from him, since he had spent so much time among them.

‘The Unknown’

2. There are other times when a brother in good standing is *not known* to the congregation to which he presents himself, as was the case of Apollos, in Acts17:27. In his case, the church in Ephesus provided him with a letter to commend him to the church in Corinth. Indeed, for that matter, before his own conversion, ‘Saul of Tarsus’ had even *requested* letters of introduction to the synagogues in Damascus, and they were provided by the high priest in Jerusalem (Acts 9:1-2).

‘The Questionable’

3. But there are also times when an individual’s conduct creates a problem in his home assembly, and, instead of seeking to resolve the difficulty in the plainly-stated scriptural manner, he decides to leave and take up membership elsewhere. It is this last scenario which evidently concerns our questioner, when she asks, "*Are congregations so independent that they will accept members from other congregations without any check on their past behaviour?*"

The Duty of Church Leaders.

Well, the doctrine of the autonomy of individual congregations is one which is both scriptural and precious, and which churches of Christ have historically defended and maintained with vigour. But independence must never cause one congregation to behave in a discourteous manner towards another, nor to act, in the matter of fellowship, in a way that ignores biblical teaching on church-orderliness.

When we recognize that '*though we are many, we are one Body*', we also recognize that it is wrong for one who is '*out of fellowship*' with one congregation to think he may merely transfer himself to another. And it is equally wrong, in such circumstances, for that individual to be accepted by another congregation.

The scriptures clearly teach that, if an individual is out of fellowship with the one congregation, he is out of fellowship with the entire Body, until the cause of division has been eliminated. But it is a sad fact that this is not always recognized. Why not? Our questioning sister may well be right in suggesting that this sort of thing occurs because congregations '*tend to get into competition with each other*' (for members).

Therefore, church-leaders carry a solemn duty before God, to establish whether or not those who come to them in such circumstances, may *scripturally* be received into fellowship. And, furthermore, any who come to the Lord’s Table having unresolved issues with another congregation should know that the scriptures warn against '**eating and drinking unworthily**' (1st Cor. 11:29).

To sit at the Lord’s Table whilst neglecting, or refusing, to resolve ongoing problems, makes one guilty of '**failing to discern (recognize) the Lord’s body**', thus dishonouring His body, which is His Church. What is the consequence? 1st Cor. 11: 30 describes it. "**For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep.**"

When sister congregations show respect and courtesy towards each other, and support each other in the maintenance of congregational order, we shall be a stronger, purer and more effective people.

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THE SEVEN LETTERS TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES (7)

(Ian S. Davidson, Motherwell)



PHILIDELPHIA

Philadelphos is the Greek for "one who loves his brother." The city was named after one Eumenes, brother of Attalus the Second, who ruled Pergamum between 159 – 138 B.C. The city was founded to spread Greek culture and language to Lydia and Phrygia. It was successful in its efforts. In other words, it took advantage of an open door to fulfil a missionary opportunity. The saints of God were now being given a similar opportunity to spread the message of Jesus and salvation through Him.

The city, throughout its history, had suffered much from earthquakes. In consequence, many of its citizens were afraid to live in the city itself and chose to settle in the surrounding countryside. "The impermanence of life in Philadelphia is contrasted in verse 12 with the prospect of a permanent dwelling in the city of God" (G.R. Beasley-Murray).

It appears that the church was much troubled by hostile Jews. Many of them would not accept that Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah and the Son of the Living God. Many are still of this view and their continuous deafness to the gospel call is one of the great tragedies of human history.

THE EPISTLE

In verse 7 a description of Jesus is given. We read: "These things says He who is holy, He who is true, He who has the key of David, He who opens and no man shuts; and shuts and no man opens..." I think anyone who reads through the Bible should pay particular attention at all times to the character of God. For example, I am glad that the God whom I serve is "holy" and "true". And if He is holy and true, then I should strive to be holy and true too. The "key of David" speaks of Jesus' authority to open the door of the Kingdom of God to all. Verse 7 should be read in conjunction with Isaiah 22:15-22. "This expression is an allusion to Isaiah 22:22, where the prophet promises to Eliakim, under the symbol of the key of the house of David, the government of the whole nation i.e. all the power of the king, to be executed to him as his deputy; but the words, as here applied to Christ, show that He is the absolute" (Adam Clarke).

Jesus says of the saints in Philadelphia that they have "kept my word and have not denied my name" (8). I pray that He can say that of all His congregations today. We are also reminded here of these words of Jesus: "Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father who is in heaven. But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 10:32, 33). (See also Luke 12:8, 9.)

JEWISH OPPONENTS

Jesus speaks of their overcoming their Jewish opponents (9). These Jews must have been giving the saints a very hard time. But God always knows what is going on; always hears what is going on; and always sees what is going on. Note that He accuses the enemies of the saints of lying. Lying is of Satan. "Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord: but they who deal truly are His delight" (Proverbs 12:22). "A false witness shall not be unpunished, and he who speaks lies shall perish" (Proverbs 19: 9). "Blessed are they who do His commandments that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city. For without are dogs, and sorcerers, and whoremongers, and murderers, and idolaters, and whosoever loves and makes a lie" (Revelation 22: 14,15). Imagine being described as a "synagogue of Satan". It is made clear that these servants of the devil will never triumph over the saints of God. Yes, the true people of God will one day be completely vindicated.

PATIENCE

We read: "Because you have kept the word of patience, I also will keep you from the hour of trial, which shall come upon all the world, to try them who dwell upon the earth" (10). "The word of patience" is the word of Christ's patience, "which probably means the gospel of the cross in which the Lord's patient suffering is set forth" (Hendriksen). "Patience" is *hupomone* and means steadfast endurance. It is a beautiful word and one of my favourite Greek words. If anyone showed patience in the face of terrible trials then Jesus did. Indeed, we see patience or steadfast endurance in perfection in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. The saints of God had to manifest the same spirit under their coming trials and tribulations.

PROMISES TO THE OVERCOMER

The Philadelphians are encouraged to hold on to what they have so that no one may take their crown (11). The Bible tells us about a number of people who lost out to someone else. For example, this is the case with Esau, Saul and Judas. In addition, of course, the Jews lost their place to the Gentiles (Romans 11:11).

There are a number of promises given to the overcomer: to be a pillar in the temple of God; to go no more out; and to have a new name written upon him in addition to the name of God and the new Jerusalem. It is interesting to note that Philadelphia's name was changed at least twice in its history to Neocaesarea and Flavia. So the citizens of the city knew all about taking a new name.

All the faithful saints will be honoured with a permanent abode in the holy city. What a city that will be! Nothing in this world can compare with the heavenly Jerusalem. Think of it: a city with no litter, no graffiti, no vice, no crime, no fear, no hatred and no darkness. Everything about it will be good and right and lovely and lasting. An earthquake will never come along and destroy it. It will stand forever.

FINAL THOUGHTS

I often wonder what God would say about our congregations today. Do we all live up to His expectations or do we fall short of them? Many congregations of Christ are now small in number. But, however small, God looks for them to remain faithful. He knows all those who are His and loves them all. In return, we must love Him, love one another and preach His gospel. The gospel is God's power unto salvation and must, therefore, be delivered to our fallen world. I thank God for the faithfulness of all those generations that have gone before. May future generations be able to look back on us with the same love and respect.

The Season Of Loneliness (1)

Last month we began a new series on growing in the seasons of life. This month we start looking at some individual seasons of life and we are going to start with the epidemic of the 21st Century: the season of loneliness. I'm pretty sure that some readers are thinking, "I don't need this one. I've got too many people in my life as it is." Fair enough, but let me say this, you're going to need it someday. Open your Bible to 2 Timothy 4:6-21. God tells us we were made for relationships. When Adam was in the Garden of Eden he had everything he could possibly want. Yet in *Genesis 2:18* "The LORD God said, 'It is not good for man to be alone.'" The first thing that God said wasn't good, was loneliness. And in **2 Timothy 4**, we have the last words Paul ever wrote. He is dying in prison in Rome, he is sick, and all of his friends have left him. Paul is struggling with loneliness. In this passage of scripture Paul gives **FOUR CAUSES OF LONELINESS**.

1. TRANSITION (vs. 6-8)

Transitions cause loneliness and life is a series of transitions. Any major change brings on feelings of loneliness, because with change, even positive change, we have to give something up so we can get something new. Remember your first day at school? Everything seemed so big. Or graduation? Or starting a new job? You walk in and there are a million new people around you all in a hurry and they couldn't care less about you. And it's lonely. In this passage, Paul is at the end of his life, and he says in *2 Timothy 4:6-7* "I am already poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." He knows his time is short and he is saying, "Hey, I'm all alone." Can you sense the loneliness in that passage? Did you know that 70% of all nursing home residents never get a single visit? That is a disgrace, that we leave the elderly to die alone. Statistics say that the loneliest people on this planet are elderly sick men, and that's exactly what Paul is here. Paul is going through a transition, and we'll have many, and they'll all bring on some loneliness.

2. SEPARATION (V9, 21)

When we are isolated from those we love, because of a job or travel or sickness, it causes loneliness. Twice in this passage Paul tells Timothy 'come and see me'. *2 Timothy 4:9* "Do your best to come to me quickly." *2 Timothy 4:21* "Do your best to get here before winter." And in this passage he names seven of his friends he misses. Demas, who fell away from the Church; Crescens is gone to Galatia; Titus is in Dalmatia; Erastus is in Corinth; Trophimus is in Miletus. These are his running mates. And here he is, at the end of his life, in a foreign country, in prison, and he misses friends. I was lost by myself once in London, England at night. There are 12 million people in London and it seemed like all of them were out that night. It's enormous. I was walking rather than driving. Now, can you feel lonely in a crowd? You'd better believe it. I had no idea where I was except that I was lost in a sea of humanity and I felt so lonely. I've been lonely many times since then. And sometimes it's lonelier when you're in a crowd than it is when you're at home. If you have ever been in a restaurant eating alone whilst surrounded by families eating together, you know what I mean. Separation is endemic in our society today. 26% of Americans move every year. Uprootedness is a common feeling. Americans pride themselves on independence, but the price of independence is loneliness. Now,

notice in this passage how Paul asks Timothy to come quickly. You know why? Paul is saying, "I may not be here much longer." Now, who in your life needs a phone call, or a letter, or a visit because you may not have them much longer? There are no guarantees in life except death. So do your good while you can. Make that call.

3. OPPOSITION (vs. 14-15)

When we are under attack by others, we fall prey to loneliness. In this passage we read about a man named Alexander. *2 Timothy 4:14-15: "Alexander the metalworker did me a great deal of harm. The Lord will repay him for what he has done. You too should be on your guard against him, because he strongly opposed our message."* We are not told what he did. He could have attacked Paul physically, or slandered him, or turned people against him. And Paul tells us the loneliness of being opposed by other people is painful. Remember those kids in school who never got picked to play baseball. Or always got ganged up on. They felt incredibly alone. Maybe that was you, and the pain of those days still stays with you. And lonely is bad enough; but what's worse is when we go through major pain and nobody understands. Or when we are grieving and everybody around us is laughing. The temptation when we are opposed and lonely is to build up a wall. To say, "I'm never going to let anybody close enough to hurt me again." And we only make ourselves lonelier. Then the fourth cause of loneliness, is by far the most painful:

4. REJECTION (V16, 10)

When you feel like you've been betrayed and forsaken and abandoned by those you thought you could count on. Maybe it was your friends, maybe it was your family, maybe your spouse, maybe your business partner and they stole you blind or got control of the company and fired you. It brings the pain of rejection and the pain of betrayal. It hurts, more than anything else you've ever felt, but God sees it and he cares, too. It matters. We were all designed by God with a deep need to be accepted by others and when that acceptance is withdrawn, it creates a pain almost too deep to describe. Rejection is the worst thing we can do to each other. That's why the Bible says: "God hates divorce." That's why the Bible says, "God hates adultery." Why? Because both are forms of rejection. And God knows the devastation of rejection because His own son was rejected. If we don't learn to deal with the pain of loneliness, regardless of the cause, we will deal with it in self-defeating ways and we'll try almost anything to get rid of it. We submerge ourselves in work and become workaholics. Or we try to spend ourselves out of our misery. Or we turn to alcohol and try to drink away the pain. Or sex. Because the idea of waking up alone is so painful we'll try to fill the need with somebody we meet at the club. But those are all self-defeating and they lead us into the world of depression and we go lower and lower and our walls get higher and higher until nobody else can get close and we wind up in a perpetual state of depression. And yes, even Christians fight with these things.

So, what can we do when we find ourselves in a season of loneliness? Paul tells us four things in this passage for when we go through a season of loneliness:

1. UTILIZE MY TIME. (v13)

That means to resist the temptation to do nothing. Any action is better than no action. When we're down we want to vegetate and that's the worst thing we can do. So get creative and take advantage of the season of aloneness. Here's what Paul says. *2 Timothy 4:13 "When you come, bring my coat... and my books."* He's saying,

'If I'm going to be alone I may as well be comfortable and productive.' And those are two things we can all do in the face of loneliness. He didn't throw a pity party, or complain, or give up because he's sick and his friends are gone. He doesn't say, 'Hey, is this the reward I get for all my hard ministry work? Thanks for nothing, God.' This is Paul. He's led hundreds of thousands of people to the Lord and in his final days, he's alone. So what's he to do? He says, 'Look, I'm going to make the best of this situation. I'll utilize my time to take care of myself. Bring my coat so I can get warm.' It is human nature that when we're lonely, we let ourselves go. We stop exercising; we stop practicing good hygiene; we say, 'it's just me, why cook, bring on the McNuggets.' Then Paul said, "bring me the books. I need to catch up on my writing." And aren't we glad he caught up on his writing. Because today Paul's letters are compiled in a book called the New Testament. Two thousand years later we are still benefiting from Paul's loneliness.

2. MINIMIZE MY HURT. (v 16)

Play it down and pray it up. Don't rehearse it over and over. When we do that it just gets bigger and bigger until it's out of control. You can tell when it's out of control. It turns to resentment and the bitterness of resentment will eat us up. Here was Paul's attitude. *2 Timothy 4:16: "At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them."* This great man of God went on trial in Rome and not one Christian showed up to testify for the defense. He was forced to face the court by himself. And he lost, just like he would in our courts. He didn't say, 'and after all I've done for them.' He said, 'I don't hold any grudges. Bitterness just makes loneliness worse.' And let's face it, nobody wants to spend time with a bitter person. Refuse resentment, utilize the time, minimize the hurt and:

3. RECOGNIZE GOD'S PRESENCE. (v17a)

2 Timothy 4:17a "But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength." Where is God when we are lonely? Where he always is, right beside us. Even when we don't feel like he's there, and the Bible tells us he won't leave us comfortless, and he won't make us feel like orphans. He is always with us. Please keep this firmly in mind: "Loneliness is a time to become better acquainted with God." Recognize his presence. God is a powerful antidote to loneliness. Get to know him.

4. EMPHASIZE OTHERS NEEDS. (v17b)

Focus outside yourself and find a place God can use your talents and gifts to help other people. The loneliest people in the world are the ones who are wrapped up in themselves. They are just begging to be lonely. If we want to break the bonds of loneliness stop saying, 'I don't have any friends' and start **being** a friend. Focus out and see a world that is waiting for friends. The fact is that a lot of loneliness is really a fear of love. We're afraid to put our hearts out there on the line and risk it all because we might be rejected and we know what that feels like. And when we do that we are setting ourselves up in solitary confinement and it is absolutely unnecessary. Look at what Paul did. *2 Timothy 4:17b: "so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it."* Paul's life goal was to help anybody who needed help. Here's the key to overcoming loneliness. Stop building walls and start building bridges. The first thing to do is to open up your heart to Jesus and have a relationship, not a religion. Religion never saved anybody. Then, second, if you haven't already done so, give your life to him. Be baptised, be restored, or become a part of a church family. You don't have to be alone.

REPORT FROM CHENNAI, INDIA

The following report was received by email from Paul Renganathan in Chennai, India. Paul attended the European Lectureship in Lancaster and is known to a number of Christians in the UK. It's good to hear of the work for Christ that is going on around the world. Editor



Chennai, India.
October 1st, 2006

Dear Brethren,

We are so thankful for your prayers and support in His work. Pray God to continue to bless you in every way needed. Again it was a good season of sowing and reaping. The Bible College was reopened on July the 6th. 91 students are enrolled. These come from 4 nations. The staff and students work together

for the preparation of preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The mid year gospel workers meeting was very encouraging. Over 900 workers reported on church growth. Ashwini Kumar preaches in and around Katgoara. 65 Christians worship there and 45 at 7 different places. He married a non-Christian a few years ago. She was baptized into Christ two months later. This month 18 of her folks were baptized. They started building a church meeting place.

Gajendra Deshar graduated last January and is now preaching. He held a gospel meeting each in April and May. The 1st one was attended by 6 people and the 2nd 50. Seven obeyed the gospel. They have midweek meeting, home Bible studies besides Sunday Services. His goal is to baptize 2 souls each month and preach to hundreds.

He also is praying to prepare people to preach in all 14 zones of Nepal. Now he lives with his Hindu parents close to Katmandu. This falls in Baguette zone, which has 8 districts. There are 61 ethnic groups with 79% Indo Arians, 20% Tibet and Burmese and 1% Indians. He needs help with teaching tools and partial financial help.

Workers in Myanmar established another congregation this year. Benjamin started studying with his sister and family in Rangoon and is hopeful to establish the church there.

Workers have brought hundreds of physically challenged people from all over the nation. 550 wheelchairs donated by free wheelchair mission and Rapha international



were distributed. Many dignitaries from the state government were present for this. The many thousands of Bible lessons, Bibles and bikes were appreciated by the preachers.

A 20 evenings Search the Scriptures program was held at Chetpet, Chennai from September the 11th. A Bible was offered to all who participate all 20 evenings. "Bibles in their hearts and hands". The Mobile Clinic

worked there all 20 days. A GP, an ophthalmologist, a dentist, a sinologist, and a cardiologist worked with the rest of the medical team. 2081 patients received free medical treatment. Several lives were saved because of this charity of the church. 11 received ophthalmic surgery. 99 received eye- glasses. 25 workers preached and prayed at each street of Chetpet early morning 5 to 6 for 20 mornings. Many were thankful.

207 people participated in the Bible study all 20 evenings. Another 98 participated but could not make it all 20 evenings. 6 were baptized into Christ as an immediate result. The church is established at Chetpet. They need rental help for the next 5 years. Then they will be self-supportive. The cost is \$200 every month. 21 evenings Bible study was held at Annanagr back in 1992. 109 participated all 21 evenings. 5 were baptized into Christ. 90% of the 109 were baptized into Christ in 14 years. We are hopeful to baptize at least 90% of the 207 as soon possible.

Kottiah, Lilly, Patmanabhan and Subban have gone to be with the Lord. We miss their fellowship and work Kottiah was baptized by the legendary J.C. Bailey. Having seen his firmness in the faith Bailey nicknamed him Peter. His eldest daughter and her husband were the ones who invited me to Bilai (on the way I lost my shoes) to preach the gospel and establish the church. Now 186 worship there.

Freeda Angelina got married in August. Devagnam got married on 1st week of September and Annie on the 2nd week. Freeda is the daughter of John and Sahuntala. They were baptized into Christ while we preached at Madurai and 2 of the first 4 Christians to worship and work with us in Chennai. Freeda and Premnath are software engineers and plan to move to Bangalore.

Devagnanam's father Aruldoss was trained at the preacher school and he followed his father's steps. Aruldoss is preaching full time and Devagnanam part time. Annie is a registered nurse, a Christian and the daughter of Yesaihan. Yesaihan is working for Chennai Corporation and preaching part time. In 1986 he and the rest of the Christians at Perambur were working to build a church meeting place. It was raining hard and they worked hard. Yesiahn had a catch on his hip and a few others fell ill before the building was complete. Christians from our congregation joined hands to

finish it. Now they with their children and many others worship there.

Chikun Gunia is spreading through the nation. It is spread by the mosquito. The house parents at Ruth Foundation Children's Home and some of the children who were affected are slowly recovering. One of the girls from the same home broke her left arm in an accident. While she was walking to school she was hit by a motorbike. She too is recovering. The children need a van for their transportation. The children at the Blessings children's home are thankful for their food. They still do not have a livable home.

The growing boys and girls are living in one rented hall. They will be thankful for help to build a home for them. These are the ones who came from the tsunami damage. Children at Vellore are thankful for the home. This is a donation from Meadowlark church of Christ.

The mobile clinic worked for two weeks at the flood affected Andhra Pradesh in August. The service brought much relief to the flood victims. Over 40,000 became homeless and they were living in unhygienic conditions. The story slowly changes for good. The clinic is scheduled to work at Pudukkottai, Rameswaram, Tuticorin, Capecomarin, Trivandrum and Kollam in October and November. Those are some of the places severely affected by the tsunami. Thousands of refugees come to Rameswaram from Sri Lanka because of the ethnic war there. Those in the camps need much medical help.



One of us is planning to go to Pleret, Indonesia in October to help the people who lost their homes in the earthquake and tsunami. Another taxi will be added for evangelism soon. Gospel meetings are scheduled at 11 different places for October. A church meeting place is to be dedicated on October the 2nd.

D. Daniel the builder became a Christian 14 years ago. He built a church meeting place at Gudiwada. It was a donation from him to the Lord's church. They celebrated the first anniversary on August 18. 3 Christians from east Annanagar church of Christ went there to preach the word for them. 173 were gathered at Gudiwada. These 3 held gospel meetings at Machavaram and Nutaki before they returned to Chennai. 8 were added to the body of Christ.

Your continued prayers and help sought for the furtherance of the gospel and relief from human suffering.

In Christ's work, Paul Renganathan

News and Information

Ghana Appeal

We sincerely thank brethren who have donated to the Appeal. As we have mentioned before, tropical conditions cause serious ailments unknown in more temperate climates, many of which would be fatal if untreated.

Education is important to avoid perpetuating poverty and in one town and several villages brethren are providing this much-needed asset. As well as teaching normal educational subjects they give good Christian teaching.

Ghanaian brethren are enthusiastic in sharing their faith and your funding has helped them evangelise in outlying areas. Some brethren travel by bicycle to establish new congregations and this has extended the church considerably. Provision of essential material such as Bibles and hymn books continue to be made available for these new infant churches.

Those wishing to help in this work please make cheques payable to:

Dennyloanhead Church of Christ Ghana Fund and send to treasurer: **Mrs. Janet Macdonald, 12 Charles Drive, Larbert, Falkirk, Stirlingshire. FK5 3HB Tel: 01324 562480**

The Churches of Christ Salute you

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

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

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

Rose M Payne, Treasurer.

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