

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"

Editorial Putting the "Credit Crunch" into perspective

Over the last few weeks the so-called 'Credit Crunch' has dominated our news. In fact on the world stage financial matters have moved on rapidly from what might have been regarded as a simple lack of credit, to a full blown, global banking crisis and economic downturn that seemingly has the potential to undermine the world's financial systems and stability. Over a matter of a few short weeks the apparent certainties of the world's economic systems have been revealed as

having all the strength and stability of a pack of cards due to some fearsomely bad practice on the part of those people who have decision-making capacity in these matters. The newscasts that have come into our homes from the trading floors of some of the world's leading financial institutions have shown us the images of the relatively young men and women who work as 'traders' in these institutions with their heads in their hands as their inability to exercise any control over events sinks in. With apologies to any Christian traders who might read this, the poor things are probably wondering where the next multi-million pound bonus is going to come from. Now of course most of the world's economies are moving into recession of one level of severity or another with all of the worries about jobs and mortgages that such a situation entails.

Gaining some perspective?

During the course of this crisis, numbers have come into public consciousness that the vast majority of us find it extremely difficult to relate to in any kind of meaningful way and perhaps the first of these that gave a sense of the scale of the problem was the \$700 billion (USD) rescue package that the United States government was planning to support its banking system. In so far as the financial situation will ultimately affect



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many people in terms of the value of pensions, savings or indeed their job security, the whole matter is serious. However I decided, in an attempt to put some kind of perspective into a figure of the magnitude of \$700 billion, to have a bit of fun with numbers, but decided to base my calculations on the United Kingdom equivalent of \$700 billion – say for sake of argument, £370 billion (British Pounds). (At least it was the equivalent when I started this article – it would be nearer to £450 billion right now – Ed). I've no idea what that kind of money looks like physically, but here's what I came up with assuming that our figure of £370 billion was represented by £1 coins:

1. Assuming that the average African elephant weighs 6 tonnes, our £370 billion in £1 coins would weigh the equivalent of 583,000 African elephants (that is somewhere within the range of the current estimated total population of African elephants). That's some big herd!
2. Piled on top of each other, the £1 coins would reach the height of 730,000 miles – that's roughly equivalent to 133,000 Mount Everest's stood on top of each other; a distance equivalent to 28 times around the Equator; or, believe it or not, 3 times the distance to the moon!
3. Placed end to end in a line our £1 coins would stretch for 5.05 million miles or the equivalent of 203 times around the world's equator.
4. If all of the coins were laid out in a square (difficult I know with round coins but you know what I mean) they would cover an area of 69 miles squared – for UK readers that's something like an area with Liverpool, Sheffield, Coventry and somewhere in East Wales as its corners.

Having done all of those calculations (sad, I know) I'm not sure that they help much in gaining a sense of perspective but I thought I might as well share them with you anyway – you can maybe use them to impress your friends or work colleagues!! What we do know is that these figures are huge and unrelated to anything else in our experience.

After 15 years or so of almost unbroken economic growth and relative well-being most of us had been lulled into a false sense of security. Some had no doubt made plans for retirement carefully nurturing the value of investments to make that a reality, others perhaps to sell a home and downsize to free up some cash, yet others to buy a home and get on to the property ladder. And then almost overnight there is the need to reassess priorities, delay or abandon plans, check whether our money carefully tucked away in those bastions of the financial world, the banks, is in fact actually safe at all.

Lay up for yourselves...

Now it would be silly to say that none of this affects Christian men and women. The Christian that loses his or her job is going to be every bit as concerned about the immediate future as the non-Christian in the same position. Similarly a Christian with deposits in a bank that is reported to be under threat is going to be just as anxious to get that money out as anyone else. I think that more likely represents good stewardship rather than greed or 'the love of money'.

However in these trying economic circumstances there is no doubt that the Christian mind is easily drawn back to a consideration of, and admiration for, the wisdom of God and it remains quite remarkable that despite all of the technological advances that mankind has made over the years, he has still not delivered anything that undermines the wisdom and relevance of what God has revealed to us. It ought to come as no surprise either that Jesus had some astonishingly good advice to offer to

people about how to keep a sense of perspective in their lives. In one of his earliest recorded public teachings Jesus had this to say: **"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasure in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also"** (Matt 6:19). Now in our recent experience the manner in which our 'treasure' has lost a certain amount of its value may have changed from 'moth and rust', but the reality of the susceptibility of earthly wealth to losing its glitter and value is just as evident today as it ever was. If Jesus were speaking today he might just as easily refer to 'toxic debt' as a problem as he did to 'moth and rust'. But of course the real message here is about an understanding of where true value and true treasure lies and it certainly is not in the uncertainty and temporary nature of earthly riches but rather in the absolute security of the love of Jesus, as He would progressively go on to reveal during His ministry.

Where true value lies...

Luke records other words of Jesus that in some respects mirror the teaching that Matthew records. Living as we do in a world that seems beholden to status and celebrity one aspect of Jesus' teaching that Luke records is particularly appealing. One questioner had invoked the help of Jesus in trying to persuade his brother to divide an inheritance with him and Jesus responded like this: **"Take heed, and beware of all covetousness; for a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions"** (Luke 12: 13 – 15). Isn't that so true? A man's life is not made up of things that he owns; indeed there are some people around whose lives are extremely rich even though in material terms they may have very little. We shouldn't measure people by what they have, but by what they are and we should be glad when other people apply that criterion to us as well. I'm not big into 'reality' TV programmes but every now and again I will sit and watch an episode of 'The Secret Millionaire'. This is a programme that follows extremely wealthy people as they effectively go under cover to spend a bit of time working amongst disadvantaged groups, or in hostels, or with people who are trying to operate socially advantageous schemes for the elderly or youngsters often working on a hand-to-mouth basis in terms of funding. Very often they scratch around to raise money to continue their projects. Having spent time working with these groups 'the secret millionaire' goes away to reflect on what he/she has seen and then goes back to some or all of these groups to 'come clean' about his/her financial status and to offer some financial help to the groups. Very often the millionaire establishes a long-term relationship with one group or another. OK it's a TV show, but what is encouraging is that the millionaire seems to grow by being exposed to the harsh reality of another person's existence and the struggle to make a difference. It's almost as if there is suddenly a purpose to their wealth and they become bigger and better people and their life becomes, however temporarily, more meaningful for having been confronted with another type of existence. There is a sense of life having a greater meaning in that their 'abundance of possessions' has been put to some worthwhile cause and some of them are visibly moved by the experience. They reflect a little more of what they are, rather than what they have.

Our faith and hope are in God

One of the most regularly used phrases by the economic experts over the last few months has been that matters won't improve 'until confidence returns to the financial markets'. That is until people in general feel that they can once again trust that their

deposits and/or investments are safe. Confidence is an ephemeral quality; it ebbs and flows often without any tangible cause; it happens in financial markets and it happens amongst, for example, football teams. There is a negative change in perception about what the economic future holds and so confidence drains away; or teams lose faith in the way a coach or manager wants them to play and confidence subsides.

Once again Christians are fortunate to have a very different perspective in those crucial areas of our lives that are concerned with our spiritual and eternal well-being. Writing to Christians who were trying to live faithful lives in the midst of a pagan and hostile society, Peter had real words of encouragement and confidence for them. "You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers, not with perishable things such as silver and gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. He was destined before the foundation of the world but was made manifest at the end of the times for your sake. Through him you have confidence in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God" (1 Peter 1:18-21). There are so many aspects of Peter's statement that are sure. Our restoration is based on the certain foundation of the 'blood of Christ'; God's plan is unchanging and was conceived before the foundation of the world; God is in control of the outworking of that plan and has authority over life and death; our faith and hope are securely vested in God. As Christians, because we have an unchanging God, we have no need to worry about a change in perception of the future and no reason to lose faith in what God requires from us and has promised to us. There is no ebb and flow of confidence, because our confidence is in God.

When Paul wrote to the church in Colossae he had a message of encouragement for the Christians there and for those at Laodicea and that message centred upon the person of Jesus. Paul's heartfelt desire was that they would enjoy true riches, that is, **"all the riches of assured understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, of Christ, in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge"** (Colossians 2:1-3). There is a huge difference between the financial, social and moral uncertainties of the physical world that we inhabit just now compared to the 'assured' understanding' that we have about what Christ and God have prepared for us and are, even now, preparing us for. And whilst many of the financial plans that we might have had for the immediate future have suddenly become much more tenuous, we can be absolutely certain that the spiritual realities and aspirations that we have are just as sure now as they ever were. 'God's mystery' is, of course, none other than Jesus Himself and as our knowledge of the work of Jesus grows so too does our conviction about the eternal truths that were revealed in Him.

The Bible is cautionary about the challenges that wealth can bring, but there are rich Christians. Paul had a message for them too and it comes right back to that 'right perspective' that we mentioned earlier in this piece. Paul does not condemn the rich for being rich but he does have something to say about the obligations that come with riches and warns them to have a very clear perspective about where 'real' wealth lies. "As for the rich in this world, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on uncertain riches but on God who richly furnishes us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good deeds, liberal and generous, thus laying up for themselves a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life which is life indeed" (1 Tim 6:17-19).

The equivalent of 583,000 six-tonne African elephants in £1 coins is still not worth comparing to the 'eternal weight of glory' toward which God calls and beckons us!!

Thinking Out Loud

MEMORISING THE SCRIPTURES

Ian S. Davidson: Motherwell

W.W. Gasque in his article on F.F. Bruce in the book *Major Biblical Interpreters* writes: "Bruce's knowledge of the Bible was prodigious. Those who knew him well believed that he had the whole Bible, both in the original languages and in several translations, committed to memory. When he was asked a question about the Bible, he did not have to look up the text. He would sometimes take off his glasses, close his eyes as if he were scrolling the text in his mind, and then comment in such an exact manner that one knew he was referring to the Hebrew or Greek text, which he either translated or paraphrased in his answer...He also seemed to know all the hymns of the classical and evangelical Christian traditions by heart as well as a large body of secular poetry – English, Scottish, Greek and Latin". Not many people are blessed with such a mind. However, I think it is important that all believers attempt to memorise some portions of Scripture on which they can meditate from time to time as they go about their daily business.

SUGGESTED PASSAGES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

I myself have tried to memorise a number of portions of Scripture over the years and continue to do so. I wish to share them with you.

The first passage I memorised was Peter's first gospel address delivered on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2). We recall that it was to Peter that Jesus gave the keys of the kingdom (Matthew 16:19). Keys are for opening doors and Peter here is opening the door of the kingdom to his fellow Jews. Later, he would open the door of the kingdom to Gentiles

(Acts 10). When Peter preached the gospel for the first time on this famous day of Pentecost, I believe he preached it in its fullness. The three thousand or so souls were saved that day because they believed and obeyed the true gospel (2:41). The quotations from the Old Testament are, of course, a reflection of the Jewish audience, who believed all these Scriptures to be the word of God. Acts 2 is one of the great chapters of the Bible and I never tire of reading it or studying it. I like to read it in conjunction with Peter's address in Acts 3 in which he says the same thing, but with the use of different terminology.

Paul's address to the Athenians in Acts 17 is also worth memorising. It is interesting to note that Paul on this occasion does not quote directly from the Scriptures. Again, the content reflects the audience. Here he was in the ancient capital of philosophy, contending with the likes of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, and telling them about *The Unknown God* they ignorantly worshipped there (23). It is a masterful presentation and one of my favourite portions of Scripture. Sadly, we never read of Paul establishing a congregation in Athens. The tragedy is that many of the citizens were influenced by the wrong philosophy – the philosophy of this passing age.

I Corinthians 13 should also be memorised. The chapter is all about love or *agape*. Here is one of the great words of the Greek Scriptures. *Agape* has excited Christian writers for years. So has I Corinthians 13. They continue to excite me.

Matthew 5 is also a wonderful chapter in which we find the Beatitudes. Chapter 5 is part of the so-called "Sermon on the Mount" by Jesus. I say "so-called" because the word sermon is never found in the Scriptures. It is a theological term. Carl Ketcherside once wisely wrote: "The word sermon does not appear in the Bible. Origen has been called 'the father of the sermon' and he was not born until about 185 A.D. When we hear the word 'sermon' we conjure up a mental image of a man trained in the art of homiletics standing behind a rostrum on a raised platform. But Jesus simply sat down on a rocky hillside and

shared with people. He was 'the Way, the Truth and the Life' and what the 'Way- shower' shared was truth and life. There is some evidence that the people in our day have been preached to death instead of taught how to live".

I thought there was not a great deal in the Beatitudes until I read William Barclay on the subject. He wrote: "For most people the Sermon on the Mount is the essence of the Christian faith and life; and equally for most people the Beatitudes are the essence of the Sermon on the Mount. It is therefore not too much to say that the Beatitudes are the essence of the essence of the Christian way of life".

There are many other passages to put to memory: John 1; John 17 (Christ's prayer for unity); Romans 8 (an outstanding chapter in the Bible); Titus 2: 11-15 (a favourite portion of mine); Hebrews 11; 1 John 1; and many, many more you care to add.

THE OLD TESTAMENT

Genesis 1 is worth memorising. What a chapter! It deals with origin of everything simply, but truly. The first verse of the Bible is quite wonderful: "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth". Andrew Wilson in his recent book *Incomparable: Exploring the Character of God* writes: "In the beginning, God. What a way to start! No lengthy explanations or arguments, just a simple few words that show God was always there. Questions like 'Who made God?' or 'What was there before Him?' are shown here to be as irrelevant as they are silly. God is, was, and always will be the beginning of all things".

Exodus 20 contains the Ten Commandments and they are worth repeating again and again. If the Jews throughout their history had stuck rigidly to these commandments then what a difference that would have made to their well being. They ended up in all sorts of trouble because of their rebelliousness and disobedience. Breaking the commands of the Almighty leads to tragedy, inevitably.

The Psalms are something else! We should aim to memorise them all, including the 119th. Now there's a challenge! I began with Psalm 24 (at school) and moved on to Psalm 23 and Psalm 1. Thereafter, one can learn them in order of personal preference.

It is the same with the book of Proverbs. My father drilled into us at Sunday School Proverbs 3: 13-20. Here is good place to start and from which to learn more and more. If I recall correctly, Alexander Campbell always praised his father for urging him to study and memorise all the psalms and the proverbs, which he succeeded in doing. He said that the knowledge of them held him in good stead throughout his life.

Ecclesiastes is a fascinating book and chapter 12 is a highlight for me. It was, of course, written by Solomon, who knew a thing or two about the wisdom of God.

Isaiah 53 is a special chapter. It was this portion of Scripture that the Ethiopian eunuch was reading when visited by the evangelist Philip (Acts 8). We read: "Then Philip opened his mouth and began at the same scripture and preached unto him Jesus" (35). Isaiah has so many sections worth storing in the mind.

Micah 5:8 is worth recalling again and again. We read: "He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?"

CONCLUDING REMARKS

I could go on and on. Suffice to say that I know, dear reader, you will have additional favourite passages of Scripture. Why not confine them all to memory? Surely, it would be worthwhile to think about them in the quietness of an hour. As the Psalmist says: "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the Lord; and in His law he meditates day and night. And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water that brings forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he does shall prosper" (Psalm 1: 1-3). Yes, spiritual prosperity should be the aim of everyone. Knowing God's word thoroughly will surely lead to greater prosperity.

WHY DO WE HAVE PREACHING

(Ian Grant, Corby)

SUBJECT: INCREASING HOLINESS

I think that it is fair to say that preaching today is often not held in the high regard that it deserves. This can be seen in the number of people who simply leave worship before the sermon is preached. It is also seen in the fidgeting that goes on when the lesson is being presented and the lack of attention that many give it. This can be in marked contrast to the solemnity and thoughtful, reverent manner of the rest of worship. But that is not all the fault of the listeners, for some who preach seem to have missed the purpose of the sermon. Those who introduce or conclude their sermon with words such as "I want to share these few thoughts with you." leave one with the uneasy feeling that they have no knowledge of the real purpose of preaching. It is no wonder then that some sermons lack any real application to everyday life, and that there is no call to righteous living. Yet preaching the word has as its purpose, to change the listeners; Scripture through sermons is to instruct us in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16); i.e. how to live life on a daily basis in ways that are pleasing to God.

Equally, those who after a lesson come up to the speaker and say, "That was a nice talk" appear to have missed the point as well. From where do people get the idea that a good sermon is a nice talk? A lesson from the word calling for repentance may not be viewed as "nice" at all, but that does not mean that it was not what was needed by the brethren, and what God intended to be achieved through the sermon.

PREACHING IS A PART OF WORSHIP

Preaching is a part of our worship because God made it so. As an integral part of our worship of God, it has the same goal as everything else we do in worship – edification (1 Cor. 14:26). This word means "to build or construct" and is used metaphorically in the New Testament in the sense of building up the brethren as a spiritual building (Eph. 4:11-16). Thus, the purpose of the sermon in our worship is to build up the Church. It is not for the purpose of building up church numbers, but rather for the maturing of the individual Christians, which will in turn build up the Church. For edification and the spiritual improvement of each member to take place, there must be teaching and also learning.

CHRISTIANS ARE TO BE HOLY

That there is a need for preaching and that there is a need for Christians to learn can be seen in the emphasis in the New Testament on holiness. When we realise that the word "holy" can be translated as "saints" (Rom.1:7; 1 Cor. 1:2; Eph. 1:1; Phil. 1:1) we see that "holy" is a common designation of Christians throughout the New Testament. The word "sanctification" seems to be a word that we use rather infrequently, which may say something more than the fact that we see it as a "religious" word. However, just like the word "saint" and the word "holy" it has the basic meaning of "separation." When someone obeys the gospel by being baptised,

sanctification (separation, being made holy) takes place; "But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God." (1 Cor. 6:11 NKJV). In other words, at baptism the Holy Spirit makes us holy in the sight of God.

But it does not stop there, for while sanctification begins at baptism it is also an ongoing process. That can be seen in Paul's words to the church in Thessalonica, "Now may the God of peace sanctify you completely" (1 Thes. 5:23 NKJV). Clearly, they had not arrived. Sanctification has to be a process, for Christians continue to sin and God wants us to give up sinning (Rom. 6:1-2), and increase our holiness, which will take time, study, work, and practice.

The Christian's sanctification is God's will: "For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality ... For God did not call us to uncleanness, but to holiness." (1 Thes. 4:3, 7 NKJV). The intention of the love of Christ for the Church is that the Church should be holy (Eph. 5:27). You as a Christian are expected to "present your members as slaves of righteousness for holiness." (Rom. 6:19); in fact, you must pursue holiness for without it you will not see God (Heb. 12:14). To pursue is much stronger than simply to seek. The apostle Peter in referring to the sanctifying work of the Spirit that is going on in the lives of his readers then says that God's purpose for this is "for obedience" (1 Pet. 1:2). In the lives of Christians, while it will never be perfect and complete, there is to be an increasing obedience to Christ. Sanctification is not a one off action but something that is to continue through all of life and that will require ongoing teaching.

THE CHRISTIAN LIFE IS TO BE A LIFE OF GROWTH

Upon becoming a Christian, Christians are a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17); but it does not stop there. Having become Christians, God's expectation is that the followers of Jesus learn and practise a new way of living (Rom. 6:4). It is a new way in that it is a life of a different nature. For example, before becoming a Christian people live for themselves, but as a Christian's one must deny oneself (Matt. 16:24). That is a dramatic change if it is taken seriously; God expects it to be taken seriously. (But what are the specifics of that?) Notice that Paul does not say that new Christians merely need some rough edges knocked off and to begin attending worship once a week. God is not calling for Christians to continue their old manner of life with a few cosmetic improvements, but a new life altogether. God is calling for far more than a make-over.

The individual believer must grow in Christ in all things (Eph. 4:15). Christians must keep growing in grace and knowledge (2 Peter 3:18); it is not in any old knowledge that will bring growth, but knowledge of the word (1 Peter 2:2).

Why this emphasis on changing lives? That is spelt out (Rom 3:9-26) in detail for us. We need this to be revealed to us by God, just as the Jews needed it to be revealed to them in the Old Testament (Isaiah 64:6), for we tend to see ourselves as basically good people. Such a fantasy is encouraged by our present culture with "experts" insisting that people are basically good and that outside forces are responsible for human failure. The more we are influenced by our culture rather than the word of God, the more difficulty we will have with the idea that we are sinners rather than

basically good people. God's plan involves Christians changing so as to be conformed to the image of His Son. (Rom 8:28); that means getting out of the sinning business and that requires ongoing learning. This is a life-long process.

THAT TAKES TEACHING

Such is the change that God is calling for, that we all need to be taught about what that new life consists of, and then encouragement to pursue it. Unless we are taught what constitutes the new life and the specifics of how that is worked out in everyday life, we cannot know how to live it, or even if we are living it. We need to know in specific, concrete detail just what living the new life entails, and that is impossible unless God reveals it to us through Scripture, and we learn about it from Scripture. That can be done directly through the personal study of Scripture or through a teacher. A part of God's plan for Christians is that it be done in part through the sermon. When done through some person, it is essential to check out what is taught to make sure that it conforms to the word of God (Acts 17:11) and so individual study is essential. Serious study is not simply the domain of the scholarly few.

When the word is preached it ought to change the worshippers; not by knocking off a few rough edges, but in very substantial ways. The need for that ought to be obvious to us when we consider the amount of interpersonal conflict in the Church and within families. When life is akin to a boxing match instead of being filled with love, then there is something seriously wrong. But, encouraged by our culture, we blame everything except ourselves. And if it is not our fault, what need is there for us to change, and what need is there for us to study the Scriptures in more depth in order to discover how we ought to change?

CONCLUSION

God put preaching in the worship service and told us that it is his word that is to be preached (2 Tim. 4:2). God gave us his word to teach us about how to live life and equip us for every good work (2 Tim 3:16-17). There is much that could be preached about the Bible, that some might find interesting, but would be of little use in changing behaviour so that the listeners might become more holy. The aim of preaching ought to be to change people so that they become more holy; to change their thinking and to change their behaviour as a result and not simply to impart knowledge that may or may not be of interest to the hearers.

Preaching that helps people to change will of necessity entail hard work. It will require the in-depth study of Scripture and that will require a serious look at the meaning of many of the words used in the Bible that describe behaviour. For example, lessons on the family using Eph. 6:1-4 are not unknown in the Church. Yet how often does that include an explanation of what "training" means and what "admonition" means? If people are to do what this requires, and it is commanded, then we need to know what the terms entail and what the difference is between the two words. If those who preach do not understand exactly what Christians ought not to be doing, and precisely what it is that they must be doing, to be like Christ, then how can sermons achieve their intended purpose? When sermons connect with everyday living, as God intended, then preaching will not have such a bad press and there will be far less conflict in the Church, Christians will be more holy, and God will be honoured.

INFLUENCES ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHRISTIANITY IN THE FIRST CENTURY

(John H Diggle (Nottingham))

STUDY 14 Non-BIBLICAL EVIDENCES OF JESUS

Thanks to the thorough and scholarly researches of FF Bruce we have available to us a valuable and impressive collection of material on this subject for which due acknowledgement must be made at the outset. So far as extra-biblical references are concerned Professor Bruce has classified these into two types, those from pagan sources and those from Jewish literature.

PAGAN SOURCES

1. THALLUS

Thallus was a Samaritan historian who lived and worked in Rome around the middle of the 1st century. We only know his words by virtue of references to them in those of Julius Africanus. In speaking of that darkness that fell over the land during the crucifixion of Jesus (Mark 15:33), Africanus gives the following statement – “Thallus, in the third book of histories, explains away this darkness as an eclipse of the sun.”

Whilst we may be a little disappointed with the fact that Thallus saw fit to ‘explain this away’, there is at least evidence here of the factuality of that event being sufficient to invoke the perceived necessity of his doing so, as an unbeliever.

2. MARA-BEN-SHARON

Bruce also draws our attention to a document held in the British Museum that contains the text of a letter sent by a Syrian of this name to his son. In it the father pleads with his wayward child, now in prison, to avoid the folly of persecuting wise men such as Socrates, Pythagoras and Christ. Having recalled the burning of Pythagoras by the men of Samos and the enforced ‘suicide’ of Socrates, this is how the letter concludes: “What advantage did the Jews gain from executing their wise king? It was just after that their kingdom was demolished. God justly avenged these three wise men: the Athenians died of hunger; the Samians were overwhelmed by the sea; the Jews, driven from their land, live in complete dispersion. But Socrates did not die for good, he lived on in the teaching of Plato; Pythagoras did not die for good, he lived on in the statue of Hera. Nor did the wise King die for good; He lived on in the teaching He had given.”

This manuscript dates from a short time after AD73 and by then it is clear that there were those, even amongst pagans, who were prepared to concede Jesus’ fitness to be compared with the ‘great men of the age’.

3. CORNELIUS TACITUS

We have come across this historian before in our studies and this is what he has to say in the “Annals” Book 15 section 44 in relation to the Great Fire of Rome (AD64) started by Nero. “Consequently to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite of tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called

Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilate."

Tacitus was no lover of Christ or Christians, but there can be little doubt about his acknowledgement of the historicity of either.

4. PLINIUS SECUNDUS (that's Pliny the Younger to you and me).

Pliny was governor of Bithynia and wrote, on several occasions, to his emperor, Trajan, seeking advice on how to deal with the sect called the Christians, who, in his estimation, were a constant source of trouble in his province. One letter, from AD 112, reveals the content of a confession, extracted under torture: "They were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before light, when they sang an anthem to Christ as God, and bound themselves by a solemn oath not to commit any wicked deed ... after which it was their custom to separate and then meet again to partake of food, but food of an ordinary and innocent kind" (Epistles of Pliny 10:96).

5. SUETONIUS

Suetonius wrote a major and authoritative work called "The Lives of the Twelve Ceasars", a work that is still readily available. We have already seen contributions from this work in relation to some of the topics covered in previous studies, but it is this, from his treatment of the life of emperor Claudius, written in AD120 for which he is best known amongst students of Christian history: "As the Jews were making constant disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from Rome." Luke records the same expulsion in Acts 18:1 - 2.

JEWISH SOURCES

6. THE TALMUD

The Talmud is a compilation of two separate books, the Mishnah, which is mainly concerned with Jewish, religious legal practice, and the Gemaras, which consists of commentary and analysis on the Mishnah. Together they are known as the Talmud. As we might expect, given their Jewish origins, they have nothing good or complimentary to say about Jesus, to whom they refer as Yeshua of Nazareth, but the frequency of such references is such as to leave little room for doubt that the Jewish writers were well aware of His existence.

2. FLAVIUS JOSEPHUS

So regularly did I hear this name when I was a small boy, that I could not help but wonder whom 'Joe Sefas' was. Well, now I know. He began life as a general in the army of Israel, but on journeying to Rome, and becoming a Roman citizen, he took the name Flavius in honour of the Flavian dynasty of its emperors.

Apart from the Bible, his is the major contribution to the recording of history of that period relevant to the first and early second centuries. He speaks of many of the same characters and events as those recorded in the New Testament, including Pilate, Quirinius, the Pharisees and Sadducees, Felix, Festus and Annas and Caiphas. He also refers to the Herods and the death of John the Baptist. Most significant of all though is this reference to Jesus in his "Antiquities" 18.3.3: "And there arose about this time Jesus, a wise man, if indeed we should call him a man; for he was a doer of marvellous deeds, a teacher of men who receive the truth with pleasure. He won over many Jews and also many Greeks. This man was the Messiah. And when Pilate had condemned Him to the cross at the instigation of our own religious leaders, those who had loved Him from the first did not cease. For He appeared to them on the third day

alive again, as the holy prophets had predicted and said many other wonderful things about Him. And even now the race of Christians, so named after Him, has not yet died out."

To unbelievers of course, this is a deeply damaging piece of support for the truthfulness of the New Testament accounts, but numerous attempts to discredit it have failed.

Any food scientist, barrister or theologian for that matter, will tell us that 'proof' is not a word to be bandied about lightly and we should be careful, if we are not to appear ridiculous, of making claims that are insufficiently supported by an evidential basis. These references do not prove anything and it would be wise to refrain from suggesting that they do. However, if, as we do, we believe the New Testament to be accurate, reliable and truthful, it would be expected that, as to matters of fact, it would be in agreement with other accurate, contemporaneous accounts.

In another respect too we should be cautious in our handling of the material presented in these references. Their witness is, for the most part, hostile to the inferences that we would draw from the apostolic accounts, yet however grudgingly, the historians who recorded them have had to own their factuality; because they have no supportive axe to grind, they are the more valuable for that.

Over the centuries there have been those in their thousands, if not their millions, who have sought to deny Jesus and the scriptures. Comparatively rarely though, have their been attempts to deny the historicity of His existence; even the most determinedly foolhardy of atheists have generally known better than to attempt that.

Whilst indications like those of the examples quoted have a great deal of corroborative value as to the factuality of Jesus' life, they tell us little or nothing in relation to his deity, and many who would gladly acknowledge the former, refuse completely to accept the latter. Comment has been made in previous articles about the worthlessness of the "just good man" position, and readiness to accept this proposition has saving worth whatsoever. We are just as entitled, on the basis of the available evidence, that Jesus was a real figure of history, as we are to take for granted the same reality of Nero, Josephus or Alexander the Great, but that leaves us still way short of having established that He is the Son of the living God. For that we cannot, and should not attempt to do without, the inspired record of the apostles, that was inbreathed by the spirit of God; having said that, we should never leave the impression that the New Testament accounts are in any way inferior to those of the kind quoted here. A great academic historian himself, Professor Bruce makes the point that, whether on a documentary basis, or that of the personal integrity, as historians, of its human authors, scripture ranks not only as equal with, but greater than any comparable historical documentation. Whilst Bruce was known to be a Godly and spiritually-minded man, who may have been supposed to be a little biased towards this kind of conclusion, others with no such charitable disposition, including even some Islamic scholars, have had no difficulty in recognising, and applauding the acumen of Luke, in particular, as a historian of first rate.

Cynics will frequently tell us that we only have the Bible's word for such and such, and demand to know why, if Christ and his gospel are as important as we say they are, there is not much more, and much better documentary evidence than there is. Generally they are completely ignorant of the type of material that has been offered here, but whether that is so or not, we need never lack any confidence in standing on the Biblical record, both for the support of our own faith and the benefit of those who are at present non-believers.

FAITH OR WORK?

V. Sujatha, Stretford

I was reading Mahatma Gandhi's autobiography. In it was written that, when he was in London somebody told him about Christianity and encouraged him to become Christian. He became interested in the Bible and read it and was very inspired by it. We might have heard and read somewhere that Mahatma Gandhi quoted from it. If you are a Christian, you must have read some of that quotation in the Bible. From these we can see how much Gandhi was influenced by this book. Gandhi's famous quotation: "If someone hits you on one cheek, show him the other." Many people in India believe this famous quotation to be Gandhi's, but it is actually one of the teachings of Christ (Luke 6:29). He learned many things from the Bible and I am sure it must have changed his life significantly. However, I am not able to figure out what stopped him from becoming a Christian.

When it comes to changing ones faith, we have to face many problems. Maybe our family won't accept us or maybe our friends will react badly or maybe our society won't accept us. Much of the time thinking about these things stops us from obeying Christ. But Jesus said "No one having put his hand to the plough, and looking back is fit for the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:62). Many do say we have faith in Christ, But what is faith?

Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen (Hebrews 11:1). Faith originates in ones heart yielding to God's will. So faith without works is dead (James 2:17) but someone will say "you have faith, and I have works". Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works (James 2:18).

You heard the gospel and you say you believe in Christ, so come to Him humbly like a child. Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein. (Mark 10:15)

You know you have sinned and you know that He will forgive you. For God said "I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more" (Hebrews 8:12; 1John 1:9). Come to Him and enter into his kingdom by being baptised (John 3:3-5) (Mark 16:16) (Romans 6:1-5). Then once you are in Christ, grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord (2Peter 1:5-7, 3:18) (1John 3:18).

A Christian should abound:

Assemble and break bread in the first day of week (Acts 20:7)

Grow in knowledge (2Peter 1:5-7, 3:18)

Receive the word with readiness (Acts 17:11) (1 Thessalonians 5:21)

Teach others and preach the word (Ephesians 6:19) (2 Timothy 4:2)

Should not be idle (1Timothy 5:13)

Keep His commandments (John 14:15)

Speak wisely (Matthew 12:37)(Ephesians 4:29)

Live righteously (Titus 2:12)

Seek first the kingdom of God (Matthew 6:33)

Be faithful even to the point of death (Revelation 2:10)

Help orphans, widows and those in need (James 1:26,27)

Lead transformed lives (Roman 12:1,2)

Abounding in the work of the Lord (1Corinthians 15:58)

Preach the gospel (Mark 16:15, 16)

Be blameless and harmless children of God (Philippians 2:15)

Walk as children of light (Ephesians 5:8)
Love your enemies (Luke 6:35)
Not be jealous (Galatians 5:20)
Not sin when provoked to anger (Ephesians 4:26)
Love God and their neighbour (Luke 10:27)
Overcome evil with good (Romans 12:17-21)
Not fornicate, worship idols, practice homosexuality etc (1 Corinthians 6:9,10; Galatians 5:19-21) (1 Thessalonians 4:3)
Forgive one another (Ephesians 4:32)
Warn, comfort and be patient (1 Thessalonians 5:14)
Be ready always to give an answer (1Peter 3:15)

Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16). Do this and your works will demonstrate your faith. By your works, faith is made perfect (James 2:22).

Great Expectations

(A P Sharp, Newtongrange)

Some time ago, Charles Dickens wrote a book entitled Great Expectations. It's a novel about a young man living in hard times but who, by following certain rules, made good. He was obedient and listened to his betters. He had lived with wary fear and trauma but he saw the way ahead and overcame tragedy. He had great expectations for the future. He got there!

What of the Christian? Do we too have great expectations? Yes we have! Our expectation is of that home in Heaven. As Christians we expect great things if we are obedient and listen to the Lord. **"Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive grace and mercy to help in time of need"** (Heb 4:16).

Yes we may have great expectations but at times life doesn't work out to our wishes. In times of need what do we expect? We must realise this, that nowhere in scripture does God promise to – as you might say – fine-tune our circumstances to **our** liking. He doesn't guarantee us a pain free, problem free environment. As His children we are free to ask what we will, whatever our hearts desire. But as His servants we must submit ourselves to His will. His will, not ours – regardless of what great expectations we seek after.

Nevertheless there are two promised gifts that we can claim with absolute confidence – namely, mercy and grace. It doesn't matter about our circumstances. You see, the Christian holds a tender place in the Lord's heart. He listens; He cares; He loves; He protects; He saves; He guides; He comforts. When we cry out, He is there.

Jesus not only listens, he extends to us the strength we need to endure any situation. We know, for example, that the apostle, Paul, had infirmities. God could have cured him completely, but he didn't. What was given to him though was the strength to endure. This is the idea behind the term grace. It was, and is, God's decision.

Unanswered prayer does not mean that God is ignoring your plea. In His own time and way the Lord will adjudge and confirm one way or the other his response to our pleas. Only remember that God's ways are not our ways. We may hope for, or even expect, what we will, but ultimately God decides. Yes you may have great expectations, but always be prepared to possibly lose out on a few. If God wills, it will happen. As Christians we live by the grace of God and He gives us the strength to withstand the aches and problems of life; and as we remain faithful to His will, like Paul, we will one day stand and give Him all the glory. Beloved let us draw nigh unto our Lord!

The Resume of Jesus Christ

— Author Unknown

My name is Jesus - The Christ. Many call me Lord! I've sent you my resume because I'm seeking the top management position in your heart. Please consider my accomplishments as set forth in my resume.

Qualifications:

- I founded the earth and established the heavens (see Proverbs 3:19).
 - I formed man from the dust of the ground (see Genesis 2:7).
 - I breathed into man the breath of life (see Genesis 2:7).
 - I redeemed man from the curse of the law (see Galatians 3:13).
- The blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant comes upon your life through me (see Galatians 3:14).

Occupational Background:

- I've only had one employer (see Luke 2:49).
 - I've never been tardy, absent, disobedient, slothful or disrespectful.
- My employer has nothing but rave reviews for me (see Matthew 3:15-17).

Skills & Work Experiences:

- Some of my skills and work experiences include: empowering the poor to be poor no more, healing the brokenhearted, setting the captives free, healing the sick, restoring sight to the blind and setting at liberty them that are bruised (see Luke 4:18).
- I am a Wonderful Counsellor (see Isaiah 9:6). People who listen to me shall dwell safely and shall not fear evil (see Proverbs 1:33).
- Most importantly, I have the authority, ability & power to cleanse you of your sins (see I John 1:7-9)

Educational Background:

- I encompass the entire breadth & length of knowledge, wisdom and understanding (see Proverbs 2:6).
- In me are hid all of the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (see Colossians 2:3).
 - My Word is so powerful; it has been described as being a lamp unto your feet and a lamp unto your path (see Psalms 119:105).
 - I can even tell you all of the secrets of your heart (see Psalms 44:21).

Major Accomplishments:

- I was an active participant in the greatest Summit Meeting of all times (see Genesis 1:26).
 - I laid down my life so that you may live (see II Corinthians 5:15).
- I defeated the archenemy of God and mankind & made a show of them openly (see Colossians 2:15).
 - I've miraculously fed the poor, healed the sick and raised the dead!
- There are many more major accomplishments, too many to mention here. You can read them on my website, which is located at: [www dot - the BIBLE](http://www.dot-theBIBLE.com). You don't need an Internet connection or computer to access my website.

References:

- Believers and followers worldwide will testify to my divine healings, salvation, deliverance, miracles, restoration and supernatural guidance.

In Summation:

Now that you've read my resume, I'm confident that I'm the only candidate uniquely qualified to fill this vital position in your heart. In summation, I will properly direct your paths (see Proverbs 3:5-6), and lead you into everlasting life (see John 6:47). When can I start? Time is of the essence (see Hebrews 3:15).

News and Information

There is no Question Box in this issue as at the time of preparation Bro. Frank was undergoing some hospital treatment, from which he is well on the way to recovery. Question Box will be included in the next issue.

Ghana Appeal

Many thanks to all who have helped and continue to help in the plight of our spiritual family in Ghana. All donations should be sent to the fund secretary:

Peter Sneddon, Ochil View, Keir Street, Dunblane, FK15 9BP
(cheques to be made payable to Dennyloanhead Church of Christ).

Dale Meikle

Coming Events

EUROPEAN CHRISTIAN WORKSHOP 2009

Lancaster University
Thurs 27th Aug to
Sat 29th Aug. 2009

Contact: **Stephen Woodcock**

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