

# The SCRIPTURE STANDARD

Vol. 73 No. 45

MAY, 2006

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

## *Editorial*

### **Blasphemy - the unpardonable sin?**

Although blasphemy has never gone away as a matter of concern it has 'enjoyed' something of a renaissance in recent times as a result of the reaction of some Christian organizations to certain stage shows and because of the reaction of some in the Muslim faith to the cartoons depicting their prophet Mohammed that some European newspapers and magazines printed several months ago (something about which we

looked at in a previous issue). It provoked me to look a little more deeply at a subject that I admit I had only skirted in the past.

Blasphemy is a serious issue so far as Christianity is concerned. Essentially the meaning is 'to deliberately injure someone's reputation' and although we would normally consider the word in the context of injurious or defamatory speech against God or Christ, it is not exclusively so used. However we might usefully think of situations in which people rail against or revile Christ, or speak contemptuously about God, to achieve an understanding of the type of injury to reputation that is constituted in blasphemy.

There are several senses in which blasphemy goes right to the heart of the nature of God, Christ and the Spirit. We are to approach God with reverence and awe. He is the creator of the universe and the spiritual father of all mankind. He is the one who breathed life into mankind and the One through whom mankind has the opportunity to grasp eternal life. It is His Christ who in love performed the ultimate act of self-sacrifice to redeem a fallen world. The Spirit is the ongoing, active, divine presence in the life of Christians. To revile the Name is to attack the very nature of God, Christ and the Holy Spirit.

**Contents:** 1-Editorial; 4-Wonderful Womanhood; 6-Ephesus; 8-Question Box; 14-The Falling; 15-News & Info.

## BLASPHEMING THE NAME

That blasphemy has long been regarded as a serious offence is not in doubt. In Leviticus 24: 15,16 there is recorded the incident of the 'Israelite woman's son' (we are told only that this man's father was an Egyptian) who, during the course of an argument with an Israelite man, **"blasphemed the Name, and cursed"**. God instructed Moses that the one who blasphemed should be stoned to death for this offence. Incidentally in this passage there are several other similar retributive actions sanctioned by God that come under the generic heading of 'an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth'. We know that in this respect Jesus, speaking with the authority of God when he delivered what is commonly referred to as the Sermon on the Mount, taught his followers to respond very differently (Matt. 6:38). Similarly, as we shall see, Jesus taught that in the new dispensation, blasphemy, like almost every other offence, is a forgivable sin (we will deal with the specific matter of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit a little later).

Of course the charge of blasphemy against Jesus was central to the Jewish case against him. During his public ministry, Jesus was accused of blasphemy for stating the truth about his unique relationship with the Father (read the first 10 chapters of John's gospel narrative to get to grips with this). In making such accusations against Jesus they were attacking the very divine nature of Jesus, questioning his integrity and calling him a liar. And of course it was the main charge that the Sanhedrin brought against him when he was finally presented to the Roman authorities, ultimately leading to his trial and crucifixion. (Matt. 26: 65-67) Luke 5 records a wonderful cameo of the authority of Jesus during the incident when the paralysed man is lowered into his presence from the roof of a house and Jesus, on the basis of their faith, offers him forgiveness. The Pharisees immediately accuse Jesus of blasphemy for once again effectively claiming to be God (a claim that they of course rejected) on the basis that only God can forgive sins. So Jesus promptly gives a very public demonstration to the crowd around him of his authority right under the noses of the Pharisees by saying to the man: **"take up your bed and go home"**. It was a direct challenge by Jesus to the Pharisees that led many who saw it to glorify God.

Later on, after the death and ascension of Jesus, the ideological battle continued and the seeds of Stephen's death were sown on the charge of his blasphemy. Acts 6:8 reveals that Stephen, **"full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people"**. The synagogue members couldn't win the intellectual argument with Stephen so secretly instigated people to say, **"we have heard him say blasphemous things against Moses and God"** and this ultimately led to his arrest and appearance before the high priest and council. After comprehensively reprising their own history with regard to Moses and God, Stephen holds nothing back in asserting their own blasphemy: **"You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it."** (Acts 7:51,52)

## MODERN BLASPHEMIES?

Before we consider one of the key passages of Scripture that deals with this matter

it is perhaps worth commenting on some modern phenomena. So many people will regularly refer to 'Jesus Christ' in everyday speech and I trust that readers will excuse me for referring to that expression in the context of this article. Much as I dislike the figure of speech, and much as I can't understand why people who have no regard for the real person of Jesus should want to use his name so commonly, I don't regard the expression as blasphemous. For the vast majority of people, much as the expression is inappropriate and offensive to Christians, it is I believe a figure of speech that has entered the language and is not an attempt to say anything about the true nature of Jesus. In a recent discussion a brother referred to such language as profane (in the sense of irreverent and not sacred) and I think this is a better description.

One example of what I do regard as blasphemy though is the apparently deliberate and provocative attempts of recent stage shows to depict our Lord Jesus Christ in wholly unacceptable ways, and I am here thinking specifically of certain parts of the Jerry Springer Stage Show and the pathetic attempts that have been made to justify its representation of Jesus. [I readily admit by the way to not having seen this show but have read enough review accounts of sections of the show to understand the intentions.]

## **BLASPHEMY AGAINST THE SPIRIT**

One of the most remarkable aspects of the New Testament is that time and time again we are confronted by the astonishing capacity of our God for forgiveness. Indeed the whole redemptive plan is based on the willingness of God to offer forgiveness through the sacrifice of his sinless Son. Without our repentance, and His forgiveness, there is no prospect at all of enjoying an eternal life in heaven. When Paul wrote to Timothy he identified himself as a former blasphemer, persecutor and insulter of Jesus who had **"received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus"** (1Tim 1:12,13). Jesus himself in one of his many confrontations with the Pharisees said to them: **"Therefore I tell you that every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven unto men... and whoever says a word against the Son of man will be forgiven..."** (Matt 12: 31,32) So yes, blasphemy is a forgiveable sin; there is forgiveness for those who speak a word against the Son of man.

So what then about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit? In the passage referred to above in Matthew 12, Jesus tells the Pharisees, **"...but blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven...; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come."** This is a very specific issue and I personally do not believe that any Christian, consciously or sub-consciously, can be guilty of blaspheming the Holy Spirit. Jesus healed a 'blind and dumb demoniac'. (Matt 12: 22) The charge that the Pharisees made against Jesus was that he was carrying out his works through the power of the devil. **"It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man cast out demons."** Mark records this incident in very similar vein: **"He is possessed by Beelzebul, and by the prince of demons he casts out demons."** Wasn't this a grotesque attempt by the Pharisees to exact the greatest possible injury to the name and reputation of Jesus? To claim that Jesus, God in the flesh, was performing his works by the power

of the very evil that He had come to overthrow and free mankind from! To publicly claim to the people that the authority by which Jesus acted was of Satan goes way beyond an insult; rather it attempts to attack the very nature of the Godhead and attribute evil to that which is wholly good. Was this some passing, injudicious mistake of the Pharisees, said in ignorance? No it wasn't. It was a deliberate, concerted and sustained attempt to completely misrepresent Jesus. As we know we can resist, grieve, quench, quiet and insult the Holy Spirit – and none of these represents the unpardonable sin of blasphemy. But to associate the Holy Spirit with evil or attribute the work of the Spirit to Satan – now that is blasphemy against the Spirit, and the Pharisees were guilty of it. Is this then a sin that the Christian can commit? I simply ask how any Christian could conceivably attribute the work of the Spirit to Satan and become guilty of this unpardonable sin because it requires a complete denunciation of the divine quality of the Spirit.

There are many around us today who speak ill of God; there are many who glibly attribute most of the world's problems to 'religion' and implicate God in that belief; there are those who want to ridicule God and belief in Him and those who want to belittle God by their words, actions and depictions of Him. There is faithlessness, irreverence, naivety and ignorance associated with these views. Others perhaps have more sinister motives, wanting to undermine the very fabric and foundation of Christian (and more generally) religious faith, seemingly unable to accommodate the challenge that issues of faith confront them with. Come the dawning of faith in any of these lives, God will proffer the hand of forgiveness and love, because he forgives even those who have spoken a word against him or blasphemed, persecuted or insulted him. But woe betide the person who attributes the works of almighty God in the Spirit to Satan, the enemy of mankind.

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# WONDERFUL WOMAN

## Women of the Bible 11

Ann Boland, Germany

In this issue, I want to look at the women in three cases in the Old Testament. We are not told their names, but they are interesting to study.

The first is the Witch of Endor. All we know about her is that Saul consulted her about his position, that is, God was not answering him **"by dreams or Urim or prophets"**. **I Samuel 28 v 6** (Urim being one of the stones the High Priest wore – by this time Samuel had died). What is interesting about this story is that the existence of "witches" or "mediums" is confirmed. People who say there is no such thing as spirits or ghosts should read this story. There are other verses telling us not to get involved with such matters **Leviticus 19 v 31, Leviticus 20 v 6**, and, perhaps the best advice of all **Isaiah 8 v 19 "should not a people enquire of their God?"** Saul had **"cut off the mediums"**, and now he was consulting one himself. He did not find what he was looking for, as he was looking in the wrong place. So it is with us today – we look for help from each other, the government, the internet, doctors, family, and so on, when we should be looking for help from above. The words of the song "Take

it to the Lord in prayer” do not give false promises. Saul spared the life of the Witch of Endor, and that is the end of her part in the Bible: short, but with powerful lessons to be learnt.

The next woman, in chronological order, is **Bathsheba**, but I want to deal with her in the next issue, as there is so much to be learnt from her story.

Therefore, we can turn our attention to the very well known story of Saul’s judgement on the two prostitutes, that we read about in **I Kings 3**. Now, “bad” women are used fairly often in the Bible to make a point about behaviour: Rahab (whom we have studied) is one that springs to mind, and even Jesus used them to make his point in **Matthew 21 v 31 and 32**: ***“For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did”***.

We are not interested in moral judgements in **I Kings 3**, but in the attitudes of the two women. We know the story of how one of the babies died in the night, and was swapped for the live one, and how Solomon had to judge which mother was the real one. Those of us who have children, or brothers and sisters can sympathize with him. One tells one story, and the other tells the opposite. If you weren’t there, or there were no witnesses, only the two know the truth. Solomon used drastic measures to find out – he ordered the baby to be cut in half, and shared. Obviously God was with him, as the right mother was more than willing to let the other mother have her child rather than have him killed. Compassion for others is a Christian duty - see **Philippians 2 v 1 and 2**. No matter what we may think of the morals or behaviour of others, we need to have compassion and pray for them.

The third woman is the **widow at Zarephath**, whom we read about in **I Kings 17**, when Elijah was told to go there, as God had told a widow to supply him with food. This seemed a bit ironic, as when Elijah arrived, and asked her for some water and bread, she replied that she only had a handful of flour and some oil (**v 12**), and that she was going to make a last meal for herself and her son, after which they would have no more food, and would therefore die. What happened next reminds us of the fish and loaves that Jesus divided for the people. God blessed the house, and there was flour and oil every day, as prophesied by Elijah (**v 16**). We know the story of how her son died, and Elijah prayed that his life would be returned, which God granted (**vv 19 – 23**). Now this might seem a very ordinary story to us. After all, God was with His people, and it was natural that He would do “miracles” like this. The meaning of the story becomes clear when we look at **Luke 4 vv 23 - 26**. Jesus used the story of the widow to show that prophets were not accepted in their hometowns, as was the case with Elijah, which made God send him to the widow in Sidon, which was not part of Israel. Again, we can see that God used humble people to show His will. Today, it might always seem that other people are getting the credit for things we may have done. We should not let it bother us. There are thousands of “unsung heroes” in the world today, who help people because they care about them, and not for the praise and honour it brings. So it is with Christians. We should give without expecting anything in return, as did the widow of Sidon, who was rewarded by food, and the blessing of life for her son. We are rewarded in ways that we never think about – health, peace, love, family and friends. Surely these things are better than material things?

# THE SEVEN LETTERS TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES (2)

(Ian S. Davidson, Motherwell)

## EPHESUS

The first letter of the seven is addressed to the saints at Ephesus. This letter should be read in conjunction with the earlier one by Paul. It was, of course, Paul himself who had established the congregation there during his third missionary journey (Acts 19). Ephesus was the most important city in the province of Asia. Indeed, it was a commercial, political and religious centre and one of the greatest seaports in the world. The population could well have been as high as a third of a million.



Ephesus was famous for the temple to Artemis (Roman Diana), one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The rebuilt temple was the largest structure in the Hellenistic world – 361 feet long and over 180 feet wide, set on a platform 420 feet long and 240 feet wide. It had 127 pillars, 60 feet high, of which 36 were sculptured and overlaid with gold. The temple operated as a bank and a sanctuary, especially attractive to evildoers. Little of the building remains.

The ancient site of Ephesus, now in Turkey, is still a great tourist centre. The library of Celsus, the Arcadian road and the great Theatre are major attractions.

## THE LETTER

The letter begins with some encouraging statements before we come to the Divine reproof. Jesus, through John, speaks of their "labour" and "patience" (2). The former word (Greek *kopos*) is synonymous with toil, and is the toil that results in weariness. Jesus expects us to give our all for Him. Patience is *hupomone* and a better translation is "steadfast endurance". The word refers to those who do not lose heart despite their coming under a great siege of trials.

The trying or testing of evil men to prove them liars (2) was an interesting exercise. We are reminded here of John's words in his first epistle: "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world" (1 John 4: 1). So Satan was out to destroy God's plans and purposes through false apostles, false prophets, false teachers, etc. He is the master counterfeiter. The saints, therefore, had to be on their guard at all times. There is a lesson here for us today. We too have to be equally diligent and alert.

In verse 3, "borne" is from *bastazo* and signifies to bear a burden; "patience" is again

*hupomone*; "laboured" is from *kopiaio* and is akin to *kopos* (1); and "fainted" is from *kamno*, which the R.V. translates as "grown weary". "...though we may have many perplexities, and may meet with much opposition, yet we should not relax our zeal, but should persevere with an ardour that never faints, until our Saviour call us to our reward" (Albert Barnes).

Jesus went on to say that he had something against them and this something was that they had left their first love (4). This probably had to do with their love for one another. Dear brethren, our only hope in a pagan world is to love one another. And, yes, most, if not all, of us are living today in a pagan society with its false values, its false standards and its false gods.

## REPENTANCE

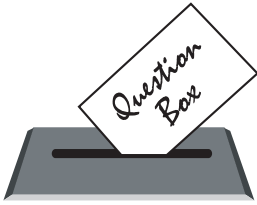
In verse 5 we read of the call to repentance. "Repent" is *metanoeo* and signifies to change one's mind or purpose, a change, needless to say, for the better. But the call to repentance was preceded by remembrance. "Memory can often be the first step on the way back. In the far country the prodigal son suddenly remembered his home" (Luke 15:17) (William Barclay). Repent is followed by the word *do*. We read: "Do your first works". God is always looking for fruits meet for repentance.

In verse 6, the Nicolaitans are mentioned. They are also found in the letter to Pergamum (2: 15). But who were they? They were obviously false teachers, whose doctrines and deeds were opposed by the saints in Ephesus. "It would appear that these teachers engaged in immoral conduct and advocated 'Christian' freedom for all believers to act" (G.R. Beasley-Murray). (It is interesting to note that God too did not hate the Nicolaitans, but their doctrine and deeds. There is the old saying that God hates the sin, but loves the sinner.) Some early church historians identify them with the followers of Nicolaus, who was one of the original seven deacons (Acts 6:5) and went wrong and became a heretic. If this is the case, then he is one of the great tragic figures of the NT.

## THE TREE OF LIFE IN PARADISE

Verse 7 contains the promise to the overcomer of his being able "to eat of the tree of life which is in the midst of the paradise of God". The account of Adam and Eve in the book Genesis immediately springs to mind. We read: "And the Lord God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever: therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken" (Genesis 3:22,23). So that which is forbidden in Genesis is allowed in Revelation.

"Paradise" is a beautiful word. It is actually found three times in the NT Scriptures: Luke 23:43; 2 Corinthians 12:4; and Revelation 2:7. The Septuagint translators used it of the Garden of Eden. Paradise is heaven or the dwelling place of God. The faithful and obedient will be welcomed into it and will live there forever. No "paradise on earth" compares with it.



## QUESTION: Angels – what is their place in the Divine Purpose?



This month I want to look at some of the questions which have been asked concerning what I will describe as, "*Angels – and their Place in the Divine Purpose*". This is a wide-ranging topic and I do not expect to deal with it in one "Q.B." article, to either your satisfaction or to my own. In other words, this will be 'Part One'.

### The Letter to the Hebrews

Any study of Angels should begin with an examination of the first two chapters of the letter to the Hebrews, because they contain more information on the subject than can be found in any other part of the scriptures.

When we look at the opening verses of the very first chapter we find that there are two things which are both surprising and significant and which certainly ought to be noticed. They are:

- 1st. *The abruptness* with which, in v.4, the writer introduces the subject of angels. No sooner has he shown the superiority of Christ over the Old Testament prophets, than we are hurried, - we might say, into this discourse about angels. And,
- 2nd. *The amount of space* he devotes to this discussion of angels, considering the brevity with which he has dealt with the ancient prophets. In real terms he dispenses with the prophets in just two verses - vv. 2 & 3, but then he launches into a passage of 28 verses in a discussion of Christ and Angels.

This has prompted the question, "*Why has the writer of this letter so much to say about angels?*" I suggest that the probable reason is that he is responding to a controversy, or a situation, which has been troubling the Hebrew Christians to whom he is writing.

But, before dealing with that controversy, allow me to make a few general comments on this subject of angels, since it appears to be a topic about which a number of misconceptions are in circulation.

### A Neglected Subject

I suspect that there are many Christians who have never heard a single sermon about angels, because some preachers are reluctant to commit themselves on the subject, and, as a consequence, it is discreetly ignored. It seems that, in a world as 'sophisticated' as ours, angels just do not fit in!

It is as though old-fashioned 'country-cousins' have come down from the hills and are an embarrassment to their modern, rich, city-relations, who wish they would go away



– back to where they came from! People today are prepared to accept the possible existence of ‘alien visitors from outer-space’ and U.F.O’s; they will believe in the occult and put their trust in pagan, superstitious, ‘astrological forecasts’; they will talk in a manner that reveals they really believe it matters and makes a difference under which so-called ‘star-sign’ they were born; and they will listen eagerly to anyone who talks about having had an ‘out of the body experience’; and listen to mediums and fortune-tellers with something approaching reverential awe - the list is almost endless.

But, mention angels, and you immediately are viewed as some sort of religious fanatic! Such is our society today!

## The ‘Post-Christian Age’

Now, this situation should not surprise us, in what has been described, whether rightly or wrongly, as ‘the post-Christian age’. What is really sad is that, thanks to modern liberal theology, many so-called Christians also dismiss belief in angels as out-dated and old-fashioned.

The fact is that much of the so-called ‘Christian world’ is merely the Sadducean unbelief of Jesus’ time, dressed up in modern clothes. You will remember, that among the sects and parties of N.T. times, the Sadducees were the ones who did not believe in Angels or Spirits, and who denied the possibility of miracles, resurrection or life after death.

That this should be the case in the denominational world should not surprise us. What concerns me is the fact that there are even members of the Lord’s Church who also reveal a reluctance to confess a belief in angels, and they advance a variety of arguments to try to justify their attitude.

## “Angels are Mysterious Beings”

Some suggest that angels are ‘*mysterious beings, about whose nature and function little has been revealed*’, and they conclude, therefore, that, “*we should not seek to be wise above that which is written*”.

‘Mysterious beings?’ Nonsense! Angels are mentioned 213 times in the Old Testament scriptures and 188 times in the New; thus, a total of 400 times. The Hebrew word for ‘angel’ is ‘*malak*’, and the Greek word is ‘*angelos*’, and both words simply mean ‘*messenger*’.

Whether a human or a spirit messenger is indicated must be determined by the context. For instance, the meaning of the name of the prophet ‘Malachi’ is ‘*My messenger*’, and, over in the New Testament, Luke 7:24 records that, whilst in prison, John the Baptist sent two ‘*angeloi*’- messengers – to Jesus.

## Progressive Revelation of Angels?

Furthermore, neither are Angels the subject of ‘progressive revelation’; that is to say, they are not first hinted at, and then exposed to view, little by little. They are there, in Gen. 3:24, almost as soon as you open your Bible, and they remain there through

to the very last chapter of the Book of Revelation.

## Wilful Blindness!

There are several places in both the U.S.A. and Canada, where you may visit what are virtually "Dinosaur graveyards" - places where huge numbers of Dinosaur bones have been discovered - (and I write this from personal experience). But I heard the story of a young man who suggested to his father that they might drive out and see the Dinosaur bones in one of these locations. His father said, however, "*I don't believe in dinosaurs and I don't want to see any!*"

## Angels still Exist!

Well the fact is that angels exist. We may close our eyes to what the scriptures say about them, but they will not go away!

## "Angels belong to an Earlier Dispensation"

This is another claim that is sometimes made. There are those who take the position that there *was* a time, in what they describe as '*a former dispensation*', when angels were active, but they claim that, since Jesus has become our Mediator, there is no longer any need for the ministry of angels. Once again, they neatly brush aside the need for any further discussion! With a stroke, they take angels 'out of circulation', make them 'redundant'; put them 'in moth-balls', you might say!

And, to some people this explanation sounds very wise and scholarly; but it is not at all scholarly nor wise, because, in the letter to the Hebrews which was written about 35 years *after* Jesus became our Mediator, the writer of this letter stated; that angels are: "**worshipping spirits, sent forth to serve those who are to obtain salvation.**" (Heb 1:14) So there is no reason to suppose that the intercession of Christ, as our High Priest, in any way affects the service which angels are said to perform.

Also, what are we to make of the words of the Lord Jesus himself, when he says, speaking of the children: "**Their angels always behold the face of my Father.**" (Matt.18:10)

Now, I am NOT saying that a belief in angels is necessary to salvation; nor do I claim to understand all that the Bible reveals about them; but I am surprised that in these days so little is said about them, because failure to understand what the Scriptures teach on the subject, or to ignore the teaching, means the loss of the encouragement which the doctrine can offer.

## "Worshipping and Serving"

Let me mention again that verse in Heb 1:14, because it reveals that angels have a two-fold ministry: "**Are they not all liturgical (worshipping) spirits, sent forth to serve...**" The two note-worthy words used are '*leitourgika*' - which gives us the word "*liturgy*" and has to do with '*worship*', and '*diakonian*' - which has to do with '*service*'. (Do you see the word '*deacon*' in the word?)

The original Greek meaning of the word '*leitourgikos*' was '*worship offered to a god*'.

and, used here by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, it tells us how angels relate to the One True God. The word '*diakonian*', on the other hand, tells us how angels relate to '*the heirs of salvation*'; they are to serve them. Thus, angels are worshipping spirits, whom God sends out to serve 'the heirs of salvation' - and that surely means you and me.

“Guardian Angels?”

If you ask me if I believe in 'guardian angels', I answer 'Yes!' And if you now put the question; "*How do you recognize a guardian angel?*" I answer, "*That is not my problem!*" I am not required to recognize him! As an 'heir of salvation', I am one of those who is to be cared for. Nor, for that matter, is the angel required to report to me on his activities. And I would further point out that, whoever else may reject belief in angels:

1. Peter believed in them. Acts 12:11. **"Now I know that God has sent His angel".**
2. Paul also believed in them. Acts 27:23. **"This night there stood by me an angel of the God to whom I belong".**
3. In fact, all of the apostles believed in Guardian Angels! **"An angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out"**, we read in Acts 5;19
4. What is more, the ministry of the Lord Jesus Himself was intimately associated with the Angels:
  - They foretold His birth to both Mary and Joseph.
  - They announced His birth to the Shepherds.
  - They called Mary and Joseph back from Egypt.
  - They ministered to Him after His temptation in the wilderness.
  - They stood ready to respond to His call.
  - They strengthened Him in Gethsemane.
  - They rolled the stone from the Tomb.
  - They met the disciples who came to the tomb.
  - They were present at His ascension.
  - And they will accompany Him when He returns.
5. SATAN also had enough intelligence to believe in them. In the Wilderness, he quoted Psalm 91:11 to the Lord: **"He shall give his angels charge over thee to keep thee..."** In fact, examine the Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, and you will see that the range of service they rendered is staggering.
6. And the Hebrew Christians had no problem believing in them, either. We know that, over the centuries, the Jews had developed a very complicated Angelology; that is a system of belief about angels, and they had come to place an exaggerated importance on the ministry of angels. (I have to smile whenever I use that term "angelology", because it sounds a rather ridiculous expression. It is not in my Oxford Dictionary, but is just a word which someone has cobbled together to give us another "ology", although I must admit that I don't know any other word to use!).

It was probably the ancient Persians who first developed a system of doctrine about angels, but, be that as it may, it is certainly true that the Jews themselves had, by

N.T. times, come to hold very firm views about them. Some of things they believed were true, because they were based on Scripture. For instance, they believed that there are millions of angels, and that is certainly true because the writer of this letter writes, in Heb 12:22 of, **"Myriads of angels in festal gathering"**. And Jesus Himself, in Gethsemane, spoke of '*legions of angels*'.

Unfortunately, however, by N.T. times, Jewish teachers had begun to ascribe incredible authority and influence to these angelic beings. They taught that:

1. Angels are intermediaries between God and men.
2. They control the destiny of both nations and individuals. In other words, angels were said to manipulate human destiny.
3. They also control the movement of the stars.
4. They have power over the elements.
5. They execute judgment on God's behalf.

Now, when people credited angels with such authority and power, it is easy to see that it would be a very small step to the *worship* of angels, and we can understand also, that angels could very soon be allowed to take the place of the Lord Jesus, as men began to depend more upon them, than on Him, in very much the same way that Catholicism has come to depend more on Mary, whom they have named "*The Mediatrix*", rather than on Christ as the Intercessor. At the very least, we can see how they could eventually come to regard Jesus as being merely, "*one of the angels*".

## Conclusion

This is why the writer concentrates on correcting this heresy and why he spends so much time in dealing with the subject of angels at the beginning of his letter. He is determined, at the outset, to prove the Superiority of the Son over all angelic beings, because the outcome of this false doctrine is that, besides denigrating - demeaning - the Lord Jesus, those who held it were actually denying his deity.

In his argument, which begins at chapter 1:4 and continues to 2:16, the writer points out seven respects in which the superiority and supremacy of Christ over the angels is clearly revealed, and the conclusion to which he arrives is that, whilst the Lord Jesus is, in every possible way, superior to the angels, He became, **"for a little time, lower than the angels, so that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for every man."**

In other words, 'the Word became flesh' – entered into human life – in order to be able to die, because, as a spiritual Being, He could not have died. In effect, the writer of the Hebrew letter tells the Hebrew Christians, **"Whatever else you make of the angels, even considering the service they have rendered through the ages, Jesus, the Son of God is not - and never was – an angel. He did that which no angel could ever do. He stooped to the level of fallen humanity, in order to raise you above the level of angels"**.

More in the next issue, d.v.  
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# The Falling

Rose M. Payne

When researching family history it is quite usual to find families of eight or ten children and sometimes we know that they were brought up in a church of Christ. If only we had all their descendants with us today we should be a much larger body of people. Unfortunately many fell away over the years.

A falling away from the Gospel was foretold in the New Testament and possibly it may happen more than once at different times and in different places. For example, the children of Israel fell away from worshipping God and turned to idols several times during the centuries covered by the Old Testament. Here are some scriptures:

- 2 Thess, 2:3. **Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition.**
- 2 Tim. 3:1-5. **This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, without natural affection, truce-breakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, traitors, heady, high minded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God.**
- Jude 17-18. **But, beloved, remember ye the words which were spoken before of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ: How that they told you there should be mockers in the last time, who should walk after their own ungodly lusts.**

In all these examples, the writers have told their readers how to respond to this crisis:

- 2 Thess. 2:15. **Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle.**
- 2 Tim. 3:14. **But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them.**
- Jude 20-21. **But ye, beloved, building up yourselves on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Ghost, keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life.**

There is no suggestion in these passages that the churches were at fault or had helped to cause the falling away through lack of preaching the Gospel.

We in Britain and Western Europe have been living with a slow but continuous falling away from church membership generally for at least a century now, affecting all denominations as well as the restoration movement. In England, attendance at all denominations was approximately 40% of the population in 1851, may have increased somewhat later, but is now down to 10% or less. This was not the kind of decline which could be reversed simply by some extra door-knocking or holding more Gospel meetings, all of which we have tried fairly regularly. We could suggest many causes, including two world wars, and the influence of Darwin, Karl Marx, Freud and the Bible critics.

What happened to all our friends and forebears who used to be members of the Lord's church in Britain? One reason for their departure was emigration to places such as Australia and Canada, especially in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, but at this time the churches were growing so it was reasonable to expect that their places would soon be filled with new members.

Later, when it became obvious that membership was not increasing any longer but falling away, other people felt that they must move with the times and make some drastic alterations

instead of taking notice of the command to **"stand fast"**. Wishing to attract those **which glory in appearance, and not in heart**, (2 Cor. 5:12) some folk formerly known to us moved to a congregation which had a fine building in a nicer suburb, an organ and a minister who wore robes. Twenty or thirty years later their hopes had been disappointed and their aims had changed. By then they only wanted unity with the denominations and eventually they bargained away many of the principles of the restoration movement in order to join a larger group who were, however, also declining fast.

Others were pursuing education and employment, getting married and finding houses, which were good aims in themselves, but when put first in their lives often led to their living in places where there was no New Testament church. So they put off meeting with any group until they could move house again, but circumstances often interrupted their plans. In the meantime their children were growing up knowing little about the church of Christ and they either found friends in the denominations or in other groups whose social life revolved around alcohol.

At intervals someone will preach us a sermon to point out that if we do not get out of a rut and get busy with some energetic evangelism, we shall suffer the fate outlined in Revelation 2:5 which reads: **Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.** Did the seven churches in Asia dwindle away because they were lazy, as some modern preachers would seem to imply?

In fact we do not know the size of these seven churches and some of them might have been very large by our standards. The main problem in Asia seems to have been that the idolatry and immorality of the pagan world were creeping into the churches, and some were becoming half-hearted in their faith. Perhaps they were so anxious to increase the size of their congregations that they were tolerating things that they should have condemned. The remedy for them was the same as before, firstly to repent of what had gone wrong, for it was of no use for them to work at recruiting new members for a church that was becoming half pagan. The churches which suffered persecution were in rather better shape. Those individuals who were still faithful were told **that which ye have already hold fast till I come** (Rev. 2:25) and **hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown** (Rev. 3:11).

There is no quick and easy solution to this problem of falling away or it would have been discovered long ago.

### **What can we learn from the scriptures and our experiences?**

1. We should not be too disappointed about numbers. There are many cases in the scriptures where God chose one person or just a few to begin something of lasting value. Numbers are no guarantee of being right in the sight of God. In fact members of a big church may remain immature because they are never called upon to take any responsibility.
2. We should be honest about the situation. We hear of churches which claim, "Look how we are growing!" when in fact it is just a drift of the population. They have gathered together some members who were all baptised elsewhere. While this is a cause for rejoicing, we ought not to claim more credit than is due, and certainly not to get into some sort of competition with other congregations.
3. Selfishness is becoming a virtue nowadays, as the scripture reads, **"For men shall be lovers of their own selves."** A talk is even being advertised in a newspaper this week on "How greater self-love can lead to a more fulfilling life." Self-sacrifice is almost never mentioned. If the subject does come up, it is usually in the context of donating some money to a worthy cause. But for most of us now, giving some spare money is a much easier thing to do than giving up some aspect of our lifestyle. On the other hand, when a Christian has clearly given up something dear to him or her in order to serve the Lord, it makes more impression than many words and is worthy of respect. **He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it.** (Matt. 10:39)
4. We are thankful that there are still a few people of good and honest heart searching for the

truth. Now and then we have the joy of seeing a new brother or sister baptised, and most of us must have found that our best prospects are those individuals who are already searching. We cannot do much for those who do not want to know. There is a good description of the process of conversion in 1 Cor. 14:24: **But if all prophesy, and there come in one that believeth not, or one unlearned, he is convinced of all, he is judged of all: and thus are the secrets of his heart made manifest; and so falling down on his face he will worship God, and report that God is in you of a truth.** Please note that the convert described here had at least enough interest to come to a meeting as a visitor. Also, remember that all Christians are lending their support just by being there, whether or not they preach. We need to keep proclaiming the Gospel in some way so as to contact genuine seekers.

5. We must preach a definite message. Some denominations are so anxious to offend nobody that their message hardly goes beyond being nice to everybody. They do not even have any literature explaining why they go under a certain name and how they are different from other denominations. Who is going to sacrifice worldly pleasures in exchange for a vague kind of political correctness? Fortunately we have an excellent message, that of returning to **the faith which was once delivered unto the saints** (Jude 3).
6. The situation is slowly changing. The population of Britain and Western Europe is ageing but at the same time many migrants are arriving to work here. They come from all kinds of religious backgrounds. Most of us have supported overseas mission work for many years, but now we have new opportunities here on our doorsteps.
7. Much of our preaching over the years has been directed towards explaining why we are different from all the so-called Christian denominations, but that means we may be talking to only a tenth of the population now. We have the whole New Testament to teach to the other nine-tenths. Perhaps, in view of the fact that atheists assert that religion is the cause of conflict, we need some good tracts on the subject of **Love your enemies** (Matt. 5:44), or any other topic which needs attention.
8. We are not entirely responsible for the results. We are not like a business where a certain amount of canvassing ought to yield a certain number of prospects, although even that does not always work. Paul said **I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase.** (1 Cor. 3:6). This is surely a subject for much prayer. We regularly pray for our own sick members in accordance with the scriptures, but we should never forget to pray for those multitudes who are spiritually sick and dying that they may heed Eph. 5:14, **Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light.**

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Subject to be announced

### October 21st

Speaker and subject to be announced.

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PRICE PER COPY – POST PAID FOR ONE YEAR

UNITED KINGDOM. . . . . £9.00

OVERSEAS BY SURFACE MAIL. . . . . £10.00 (\$16.00US or \$20.00Can)

OVERSEAS BY AIR MAIL. . . . . £14.00 (\$22.00US or \$28.00Can)

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