

# The SCRIPTURE STANDARD

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

## **BE INSPIRED... by the good that is in the world**

Elsewhere in the pages of this issue of SS there is a timely reminder of some of the obvious and other, more insidious, threats of the modern world that threaten particularly, but not exclusively, our young people. No sooner had I decided to print the piece than my Sunday newspaper reinforced the messages by detailing some of the dangers that can arise through indiscriminate use of the Internet. It is extremely easy to become depressed by the almost relentless tide of bad news (but remember good news does not sell newspapers or magazines) about wars, disputes, immorality and not just a lack of belief in God but an apparent determination by many influential people to rubbish faith in God and Jesus.

And yet it isn't all bad news and certainly all the influences on our young people are not negative. First of all let's give thanks for, and determine to nurture, the young people in our congregations. They are faithful, committed people, many of them already Christians, some of them exploring and questioning diligently until faith arises in them. They deserve that we make every effort to ensure that our activity meets their needs. During the course of these summer months many young people will have attended, or will be planning to attend, the range of summer camps that are so wonderfully provided for them and they will have the great experience of meeting with others who are keen to meet, learn and have fun in a Christian environment. Many will find Jesus as a result of these experiences and we give thanks for those who year after year are unstinting in their efforts.

This magazine is distributed beyond the boundaries of the United Kingdom into Africa, Asia and beyond. We bemoan the lack of faith in our western countries but rejoice in the fact that in many areas of the world, sometimes under considerable personal threat, faithful men and women are preaching the Word and bringing people to Christ. Many congregations in this country too are benefiting from the vibrancy and zeal of black Christians who bring a distinctive vitality to worship. We are grateful too to those who devote themselves to organizing support, relief and Christian teaching for people in India, Ghana, Malawi, Albania to name but a few of the works that go on.

Space only allows the most cursory of mentions of the vast array of 'good works' that are being performed incessantly by Christian people, people who are striving to be "the workmanship of Christ", who show their love and compassion by supporting, visiting, encouraging, caring for, and yes, in numerous ways, inspiring those who are around them. Thank God for goodness!!

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# THE SEVEN LETTERS TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES (3)

(Ian S. Davidson, Motherwell)

## SMYRNA



The second letter (Revelation 2:8-11) was addressed to the saints in Smyrna. Smyrna was located some 35 miles north of Ephesus. The modern Turkish port of Izmir conceals almost all traces of the ancient city.

Old Smyrna was founded in the early first millennium B.C. and has traditions associated with the great Homer. During the Graeco-Roman period the city flourished through trade and its population grew probably to one hundred thousand plus. Cicero spoke of Smyrna as one of the most flourishing cities of Asia and Strabo described it as the finest of the Ionian cities. The city became known as "The Crown of Asia".

Smyrna was famous as the first city in Asia Minor to erect a temple to the cult of the city of Rome. It was also well known, for example, for its stadium, public library, agora, aqueduct, grain market, gymnasium, odeon, theatre, paved streets and the great temples to Zeus, Apollo, Aphrodite and Asclepius.

Smyrna grew to have a strong and influential Jewish community. The later Christian community met persecution. Smyrna's most famous martyr was Polycarp. He died in A.D. 155 in the arena. He was encouraged to curse Christ to save himself, but he loved Jesus to the end. His dying words were: "Eighty and six years have I served Him and He has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" Clearly, a Christian's lot in Smyrna was never an easy one.

## THE LETTER

The letter begins: "These things says the first and the last, who was dead and is alive...". "The First and the Last" is a title belonging to God in the Old Testament. We read in Isaiah 44:6: "Thus says the Lord the King of Israel, and His redeemer the Lord of hosts; I am the first, and I am the last; and beside me here is no God." Isaiah 48:12 reads: "Hearken unto me, O Jacob and Israel, my called; I am He; I am the first, I also am the last." There is no problem in reconciling Isaiah with John if one believes that Jesus was Immanuel (God with us). Jesus' resurrection was different from any other resurrection from the dead because He was the only one who arose from the grave to die no more.

We read: "I know your works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but you are rich) and I know the blasphemy of them who say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan." (v9) Tribulation is *thlipsis* and speaks of pressure. It is interesting to note that a *tribulum* was originally a threshing instrument. As one writer has put it: "Suffering and trials tend to separate the grain from the chaff." "Poverty" is *ptocheia* and describes complete destitution. Why had they fallen into such a state? Probably because they were of the lower classes of society in the first place and they had lost what little they had through persecution. The Jews are accused of blasphemy - an accusation of the worst kind.

## PERSECUTION

The Jews were the instigators of the persecution. Their action meant they were of Satan and

not of God. "The opposition of the Jews at Smyrna to Christians was not untypical. Acts and the epistles of Paul provide many illustrations of Jewish violence against the Church, and Christian writers in the next century attest the continuance of their active hostility." (Beasley-Murray) The persecution would lead to imprisonment, trial and judgement. There was a strong possibility that some would die for their faith. Jesus says: "Fear none of those things which you will suffer..." (10a). We are reminded of His words in the so-called Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are you, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets who were before you." (Matthew 5: 11,12)

The period of tribulation is "ten days" (v10). The ten days might refer to ten years, according to Ezekiel's statement (4:6b), or "a considerable but limited period of testing, which God would bring to a close as soon as its purpose would be accomplished" (Robert Wallace Orr).

## FAITHFUL UNTO DEATH

We read: "Be you faithful unto death, and I will give you a crown of life...He who overcomes shall not be hurt of the second death" (10b, 11b). Faithfulness is paramount in our service to God. I recall reading somewhere that in Smyrna the word *stephanos* (crown) referred, among other things, to a laurel crown given as a reward for faithful municipal service. But Jesus is now revealing to the faithful saints dwelling in the Crown of Asia that they will one day receive not a crown that fades away, but an eternal crown, a crown of life or a crown of righteousness (I Corinthians 9:25; 2 Timothy 4:8; James 1:12; 1 Peter 5:4).

"The second death" is in stark contrast with "the crown of life". The phrase refers to eternal death or eternal separation from God. Later in Revelation we find these words: "And death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death" (20:14). Other terms that come to mind are hell or Gehenna, which speaks of eternal punishment, eternal suffering and eternal destruction.

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# CRUMBLING FOUNDATIONS

A couple of years ago this was the headline of one of the issues of the Gospel Advocate with several articles on Dangers Within the Church. This was meant as a warning to us concerning the fundamentals of our faith, which are constantly being eroded unless we are vigilant. Around the turn of the century there were many openly fought battles against those who denied the virgin birth, the resurrection, the inspiration of the Bible, to mention just a few. Whilst today these debates are not as openly hostile as they used to be, the effects are still being felt throughout the Christian world and the Church in particular.

The question we need to ask ourselves today is: Have these attacks from Bible critics affected us in any way and are the foundations of our faith strong? Have the denials they made and the doubts they expressed about the truth of God's word left us uncertain and even changed our view of the veracity, integrity and authority of the Scriptures? If older Christians manifest uncertainty, our young Christians will have no confidence because the foundational truths are being eroded. We need to have a clear understanding of the reliability and the authority of God's word.

What does the Bible claim to be? Is it totally God's word? Is it partly of human origin and partly divine? There can be no doubt for the claims it makes when we look at the evidence. Some 2000 times in the Old Testament the expression, "thus says the Lord", or its equivalent, occurs. One cannot read the Old Testament without coming

to the conclusion that God spoke all of these words. When the Old Testament scriptures are introduced into the New Testament (e.g. Matt 1:22), we are told: **"Now all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken BY THE LORD through the prophet."** It wasn't the prophet who spoke but the Lord who spoke through the prophet. Those who object to plenary inspiration (God giving the actual words) do so on the grounds that this would result in a stiff, mechanical, robotic compulsion of the person, prophet, apostle etc.

We are entitled to question this charge. "God speaks through the personality as well as the lips of his messengers." (H.B. Smith: The Fundamentals, page14) Whatever was the personality influenced by the culture, education, environment in which he lived and all the rest, it became part of the divine influence. It is limiting to the God we worship to say that he is unable to do this. Can we really think that he who created man as a free agent left himself no opportunity to mould his thoughts into forms of speech inerrantly expressing his will without destroying what he made? We need to remember what God said to Abraham: **"Is anything too hard for the Lord?"** (Gen. 18:4) What we have in the giving of the Bible to man, is a dynamic, divine influence over man's freely-acting faculties.

Inspiration is not a matter of human genius but is the act of the Holy Spirit using the mouth of man to make the knowledge of God known to others. Revelation is that information that God has made known through the vehicle of inspiration. Scripture is the term used to speak of those things that God has revealed through inspiration. The apostle Peter puts it in a nutshell when he says: **"...no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God."** The word 'interpretation' often causes some difficulty amongst young Christians. Perhaps the eminent W E Vine can help here when he explains: "'Epilusis' means to loose, solve, explain. The writers of scripture did not put their own construction of the 'God-breathed' words they wrote." (Vines Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words, page 268) We often speak of the messengers as inspired, Malachi, Peter, Paul, but it is not the men but the message that is inspired – it is God who is speaking. This is what makes the Bible authoritative to mankind. If it isn't from God in total – if the Bible is part human effort and part divine – who among men has the credentials to decide what is truth?

In the Bible, the words 'scripture' and 'inspired' get together in 2 Tim. 3:16. In the Greek the word for scripture is 'graphe' from which we have the word 'writing'; it is also used for drawing and painting. The word for inspired is 'theopneustos' from the roots 'theos', God, and 'pneuo', to breathe – literally translated it is God-breathed. The claim of the Bible is that it's origin is from God, given to us by God and is therefore one of the many parts of our solid foundational truths. One final passage that guarantees the accuracy of the Bible to us is found in 1 Cor. 2:12-13: **"Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is from God, that we might understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths...."** In the earlier verses the Holy Spirit is recorded as saying that we don't even know what each other's thoughts are and we certainly cannot know the thoughts of God. Let us be ever thankful that He has revealed His will for us and let us listen to His advice daily.

(For personal reasons the writer has asked for his name to be withheld. However I can confirm to readers that the brother is known to me and is a respected member of the Church. Editor)

# Taking Back Our Homes

Rebecca Hagelin

**Author, *Home Invasion: Protecting Your Family in a Culture That's Gone Stark Raving Mad***

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*The following is adapted from a luncheon speech delivered in the Dow Leadership Center at Hillsdale College on March 6, 2006.*

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The day I signed the contract to write *Home Invasion* just so happened to be the day that six teenagers and I set out in our 15-passenger van on a 2,000 mile vacation. We always take other kids along with our own three when we go on our legendary Hagelin road trips. This time we were heading south from Virginia to visit Disney World and the beautiful Florida Gulf Coast beaches. (I always wonder at such moments why my wonderful and wise husband, Andy, can't ever quite make it for the "road" part of the trip—he always has to fly and meet us at our destination...could it possibly be that he doesn't want to spend 24 driving hours stuck in a van with six teenagers? Hmm. As I said, he is wise. But I digress).

It was easy to begin composing thoughts about America's toxic culture as I drove my precious cargo down the highway - painfully easy. Barrelling down I-95, the roadside was filled with tacky billboards screaming, "Topless! We Dare, We Bare!" advertising the many topless bars that now dot the countryside. There was no escape from them, state after state. I wondered, "Ok, I've got six teenagers in the car - what messages are the billboards sending them about acceptable behaviour? What are they learning about the value of women in our society?" After a few hours we pulled into a gas station that had an ice cream counter. I left the teens to order and made a quick trip to the ladies room. When I returned to pay the bill, there were the two girls, standing at the register devouring their ice cream right beside a product called "Horniest Goat Weed: sex stimulate pills for men and women." So a kid can't even get a scoop of ice cream without being assaulted by a sexual message? I waved the girls away while I paid the bill, only to turn around and find them standing by a magazine rack filled with pornography.

Down the road we stopped at a Burger King for dinner—a safe place, at last. Or at least I *thought* it would be an opportunity to just relax with the kids while we munched on burgers and fries. We soon discovered that mounted in the corner was a television blaring the images and sounds of one of those made-for-TV movies, this particular scene featuring a naked man and woman bumping under the covers. So a family can't drive down the highway, get a scoop of ice cream, or even eat hamburgers without being assaulted by garbage?

## Home Invasion

Everywhere we go, from the grocery store check-out stands with their tacky women's magazines, to the mall with windows filled with mannequins and photos of young women in their underwear, to the video store with ultra-violent and pornographic movies, to the sexually graphic books many public schools are using to "teach" our kids, our sensibilities are under attack.

But tragically, the toxic culture that is poisoning the hearts and souls of our families and our children isn't just "out there." Often times the American home has become the sump for cultural sewage.

It used to be that the home was the nurturing oasis providing relief from outside dangers. It used to be that a parent's greatest worry was looking out for the guy in the trench coat lurking

in the shadows at the edge of the school playground. Well, that guy in the trench coat is now in our homes.

Don't believe me? Log on to the Internet. According to the London School of Economics, nine out of ten children who go online, usually to do homework, will stumble across hardcore pornography. Let me repeat: 90 percent of children will fall victim to pornography in their own homes. And then there's intentional porn consumption by kids. Oh, children might pass around a pornographic Web address at school, but it's in the safety of their own homes - often in their own bedrooms - that they close the door and consume hours of pornography. Over 50 percent of kids who enter chat rooms - where conversation is often raunchy and racy - say they have given out personal information to complete strangers. Chat rooms and sites such as MySpace.com have become playgrounds for sexual predators, often luring kids to situations of abuse and even death. Online pornography is more than a \$10 billion a year industry, working 24/7 to make porn addicts out of our kids - and too often succeeding.

Tired of Internet porn? Turn on the television and flip to MTV. Why? It's what your teenagers are watching. As a matter of fact, MTV is the number one viewing choice for teen girls. And if you haven't seen MTV in a while, well, let me just say that our kids are not just watching artsy music videos anymore. Today's MTV programming is filled with reality-based shows that feature kids dressed in teeny-weeny bikinis licking whipped cream off each other. Or "pooh diving"-a "sport" in which teen boys swim in open sewers filled with human waste. Or the infamous "pooh cams" where kids watch other kids go to the bathroom. Think the problem is just on cable? Why not switch to Desperate Housewives, the third most popular television show among today's teens. By the way, a recent Kaiser Family Foundation Report on media uses of teenagers reveals that 68 percent of children say they now have a TV in their bedroom, and the vast majority say their parents have no idea what they are watching.

Had enough Internet and television porn? Check out the video games our teen boys are playing. The second most popular of these games is Grand Theft Auto, in which the player actually becomes the character who steals cars, rapes women, has sex with a prostitute and then clubs her to death. And that's not to mention the decapitation of policemen.

If that's not enough, check out the books. Gossip Girls is one of the most popular romance series for girls ages 12-16. Published by Simon and Schuster, recurring themes are incest and graphic sex among children. What about some of the books our kids are reading for school-assigned reports? When I was researching Home Invasion, I decided to thumb through a few books from a list of those recommended by the American Library Association for ages 12-14. Good teachers, well-meaning teachers, hand out such lists at the end of every school year-I'm sure you're familiar with the "summer reading list" concept. After that, good moms everywhere drive their kids to the library and say, "Honey, go pick out a few books to read this summer and get started right away on that report. Go up to your bedroom and read if you're bored, because I don't want to hear you complaining that you have nothing to do." Well, I pulled a few novels off the shelves and what I found disgusted me. One described a sexual encounter between fourth graders. Another was written from the perspective of a 14-year-old boy who describes, in detail, watching his first homosexual encounter. In one book, you only need to get to page four for the first of many uses of the [swear] term "....." So moms and dads should know that sometimes when Susie is upstairs being a good little girl reading her book, her mind is being filled with rot. Of course you should also check out the sex-ed class materials that may include contests where kids race to put condoms on dildos and cucumbers.

And then there's the music. The number one music genre of choice for today's youth of all races and socio-economic groups is the often verbally pornographic and violent rap and hip-hop. According to the media study I mentioned earlier, our kids are consuming six-and-one-half hours of media every single day. And as I've described, the vast majority of it is sexual, violent, uncivil, and often plain stupid.

But what's the harm? Isn't this just entertainment? Well, let's see. Corporations spend billions of dollars every year on advertising. Why? Because they know that media affects behavior. Today's youth are the most marketed-to generation in the history of the world. Our kids are

spending an estimated \$200 billion a year on trinkets and toys and clothes and media. Marketing executives at MTV and other youth-oriented media do not brag about how they know what kids want, but about how they have learned to manipulate the teenage mind. They are selling a "lifestyle" to our children that robs them of their innocence and their best futures, and capitalizes on the natural raging hormones that mark the teen years. Instead of helping channel that energy into worthwhile activities, the media fuels the flames in an effort to keep them tuned into the programming. These marketers are teaching our young girls that their lives are all about their sexual power and our young boys that life is all about who can be more crudely funny or irresponsible. Sexual activity is expected and has no consequences. Civility does not exist. And the only brand of respect that's taught is a twisted brand of "self-respect."

The harm, then, is that in addition to the obvious degradation of our humanity; to the destruction of common decency and morality; and to the virtual death of civility; our children are paying a terrible price with their bodies, their emotions and their futures.

A September 2004 report in the medical journal *Pediatrics* reveals that children who watch a lot of sexualized television have twice the rate of sexual activity as teens who don't. One out of three teenage girls will become pregnant at least one time before she is 19 years old, giving the U.S. the highest teen pregnancy rate of any industrialized western nation. Twenty-five percent of sexually active teenagers will contract a sexually transmitted disease that they will carry with them for the rest of their lives. Half of the new STD cases in this country every year are in young people ages 15-24. The suicide rate among children 14 years old and under has increased 75 percent in the last ten years. According to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, freshmen are entering colleges in record numbers with clinically diagnosed depression. The college suicide rate is the highest it has ever been.

And have you ever heard of "cutting"? It's a heart-breaking phenomenon of self-mutilation now common in middle schools across the country. Our teenage daughters are using razor blades and knives to make slashes in their arms, just so they can feel alive.

Are we crazy? Has our culture gone stark-raving mad?

## **Taking Responsibility**

Before we point the finger at Hollywood, the government, or the business community for what is happening to America's youth, we must look at ourselves. I've worked on family public policy issues for 20 years, and I know the solutions to these problems do not rest in Washington, D.C. Most of the solutions can be found in active, loving parenting. It doesn't take an act of Congress to take back your home.

The last time I checked, a 13-year-old boy didn't have 60 bucks to buy a video game unless his daddy gave it to him. Eleven-year-old girls can't drive themselves to the mall, nor do they have the cash to buy trashy clothes that make them look like street walkers. And who pays for the cable television, orders the Internet connection and buys CDs for Christmas presents? Well-meaning moms and dads who are too busy or too absorbed with their own lives to see that their kids need them to push back against the toxic culture, not invite and pay for it to invade their homes.

Many parents are more concerned about being their children's friend than they are about parenting. But kids don't need more drifting friends; they need their moms and dads. Our children are feeling around for boundaries, for a firm foundation on which they can build their lives, for love and nurture.

The greatest gift we can give our children is to teach them that there is a God that loves them; that He knows their names, and knows how many hairs are on their heads. They must know that God created them as unique individuals, in His image, with unique contributions only they can make to their fellow men. We must teach them the two greatest commandments: to love God with all their hearts and to love others as they love themselves. And we must teach them to tell truth from lies, good from evil.

We should remember that it is adults who create pornographic Web sites and spam our



children's inboxes with pornographic e-mail; adults who design and build trashy billboards and run topless bars; adults who design thongs for ten-year-olds; adults who create MTV programming and own the record labels and publish trashy teen romance novels. In other words, our battle is not with our children, but with adults who hold a corrupt view of the purpose of life.

Please hear my heart on this matter: Modern technology is not the enemy. I believe that modern technology has the potential to be a great liberator of families, allowing more parents to spend more time working from home. My goodness, the world is at our children's fingertips, enabling them to access information and do research in minutes that used to take hours to complete. But there are a lot of people who use this technology for harm, too. We must harness the good and filter out the bad. I wrote *Home Invasion* as a wake-up call to parents and as a handbook for how to take back their homes. I didn't want just to talk about our societal problems; I wanted to provide resources to help people fight back. So it lists counselling organizations that can help if someone in the family is addicted to pornography; resources on educational choices; information about controlling Internet infiltration; and research on the tremendous impact that simple acts like having family meals together can have on children.

Probably the single greatest safety act you can perform today is to download an Internet filter. The one I use takes a few minutes and a few keystrokes to download, and costs about 50 bucks a year. As far as the television, don't throw it out; just monitor how it is used. If you subscribe to digital cable television, you can obtain parental controls at no charge by contacting your local cable provider. What about the movies your kids see or rent at the video store? Be smart. Check out movie reviews written by people who share your concern for decency. Internet sites such as [pluggedinonline.com](http://pluggedinonline.com) are excellent tools in this regard.

There are several practical resources available to help us make wise choices for our kids. But the best tool we can use is our expression of our love for them as people. And sometimes, that commitment is difficult. I know what it's like to have my 13-year-old daughter look at me with tears streaming down her face and say, "But Mom, all my friends are going to that movie." It rips my heart out. But in those moments, I sit Kristin down and I say, "You know what, Kristin? God made me your mom, and I love you more than anybody else in the world could possibly love you. I have to do what I think is best for you. Please allow me to be your Mom, allow me to love you, allow me to protect you the best way I know how. I might make mistakes, but as long as there is breath in me, I will be here for you." And then, we always find something else to do that's fun for her.

Those situations could easily turn into ugly scenes where I scream, "No, you're not going to that movie and I don't care what you say! Go to your room!" Or they can turn into moments where I give in, too tired to fight another battle, sending my daughter off with the message that standards only apply when I'm not worn out. Instead, when I remember that I'm the one who is supposed to model love, forgiveness and integrity, those situations turn into wonderful bonding moments that we both cherish, and that children desperately crave.

We must remember that our kids want us to be involved in their lives. They don't really want or need another gadget or the hottest video game. What they really want is more time with Mom and Dad. They need us desperately, not to build walls around them that shut them off from the world, but to build within them a moral compass that will guide them when they go out into the world each day. Not only will they be spared much harm having this compass, but they will succeed better as adults. And maybe, just maybe, if enough of us commit now to taking back our homes, there will one day be enough adults to reclaim our culture.

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[Bro. Allan Ashurst sent this piece through to me. Although it is based on experiences in the USA, the influences in the UK are not much different. Some readers may be disturbed by the frankness of the content but I have absolutely no hesitation in reprinting it. It is a timely and welcome reminder of the dangers that our young (and not so young) people face. Editor.]



# WHO'LL TAKE THE SON?

A wealthy man and his son loved to collect works of art. They had everything in their collection from Picasso to Raphael. They would often sit together and admire the great works of art.

When the Vietnam conflict broke out the son went to war. He was very courageous and died in battle whilst rescuing another soldier. The father was notified and grieved deeply for his only son.

About a month later, just before Christmas there was a knock at the door. A young man stood at the door with a large package in his hands. He said, "Sir, you don't know me but I am the soldier for whom your son gave his life. He saved many lives that day and he was carrying me to safety when a bullet struck him in the heart and he died instantly. He often talked about you and your love for art." The young man held out his package. "I know this isn't much. I'm not really a great artist but I think your son would have wanted you to have this."

The father opened the package. It was a portrait of his son, painted by the young man. He stood in awe at the way the soldier had captured the personality of his son in the painting. The father was so drawn to the eyes that his own eyes welled up with tears. He thanked the young man and offered to pay for the picture. "Oh, no sir! I could never repay what your son did for me. It's a gift."

The father hung the portrait over the mantle. Every time visitors came to his home he took them to see the portrait of his son before he showed them any other of the great works he had collected.

The man died a few months later. There was to be a great auction of his paintings. Many influential people gathered, excited over seeing the great paintings and having an opportunity to purchase one for their collection. On the platform sat the painting of the son. The auctioneer pounded his gavel. "We will start the bidding with this picture of the son. Who will bid for this picture?"

There was silence.

Then a voice from the back of the room shouted, "We want to see the famous paintings. Skip this one." But the auctioneer persisted. "Will somebody bid for this painting? Who will start the bidding? \$100. \$200?"

Another voice angrily shouted, "We didn't come to see this painting. We came to see the Van Goghs, the Rembrandts. Get on with the real bids." But still the auctioneer continued, "The son! The son! Who'll take the son!"

Finally a voice came from the very back of the room. It was the long time gardener of the man and his son. "I'll give \$10 for the painting" Being a poor man it was all he could afford.

"We have \$10, who will bid \$20?"

"Give it to him for \$10. Let's see the masters."

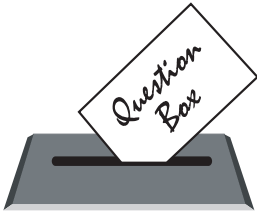
"\$10 is the bid, won't someone bid \$20?"

The crowd was becoming angry. They didn't want the picture of the son. They wanted the more worthy investments for their collections. The auctioneer pounded the gavel. "Going once, twice, SOLD for \$10." A man sitting on the second row shouted, "Now let's get on with the collection!"

The auctioneer laid down his gavel. "I'm sorry but the auction is over." "But what about the paintings", someone shouted. "I'm sorry. When I was called to conduct this auction, I was told of a secret stipulation in the will. I was not allowed to reveal that stipulation until this time. Only the painting of the son would be auctioned. Whoever bought the painting would inherit the entire estate, including the paintings. The man who took the son gets everything!"

Some 2000 years ago, God gave his Son to die on the cross. Much like the auctioneer, His message today is: **'The Son, the Son, who'll take the Son?'** Because you see, whoever takes the Son, gets everything. **"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."** And that is real love!

(Submitted by Tom King, Kirkby-in-Ashfield.)



QUESTION: What does writer of the Hebrew letter mean when he tells us that the blood of Jesus speaks better things than the blood of Abel?



## “THE BLOOD OF ABEL”

The text is from Hebrews 12; 24: ***“But you have come to... Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks more graciously than the blood of Abel.”*** (R.S.V)

The first question we need to ask is; *“To which blood is the writer referring?”* Has he in mind Abel’s own blood, shed by Cain? Is he referring to the blood spilled by an act of murder, which God said, *‘spoke to Him’* that is, *‘cried out to Him from the ground?’* (Gen. 4:10) Or, is the writer referring to *the blood of the lamb* which Abel himself offered in an act of *sacrifice*?

### **Not The blood of Abel himself.**

The notion that it was Abel’s own blood that *‘cried from the ground for vengeance’* or *‘for justice’* has sometimes been advanced by both preachers and teachers, but in doing so it has become an example of using a *fact* to draw a *false conclusion!*

That Abel’s blood was *‘heard to speak’* by God, is a fact, because that is what the scriptures tell us. But to claim that *‘Abel’s blood cried out to be avenged’*, is to make an unwarranted assumption, because there is not a word in the scriptures to suggest that Abel’s blood demanded vengeance, or cried out for justice.

However, this has not prevented preachers presenting their hearers with the neat, though inaccurate, theory that: *“The blood of Jesus speaks better things than the blood of murdered Abel, because whilst the blood of Abel cried out for justice, the shed blood of Jesus proclaims forgiveness!”* Only the last seven words in that sentence state the truth!

### **Consider Abel’s story once again.**

This is the first example of sacrifice recorded in the Old Testament scriptures and it raises a number of questions.

1. How did Abel learn about sacrifice?
2. Why did he sacrifice a *lamb*?
3. Why was his sacrifice regarded by God as *‘more excellent’* (or *‘more acceptable’*) than the offering made by his brother Cain?
4. And what are we to understand when we read that Abel was *‘approved as righteous’*?

When we come to the time of Cain and Abel, sin had already destroyed the innocence and tranquility of the world in which our first parents had lived, and the first divinely pronounced sentences had already been passed on the guilty parties. Consequently, these two sons of Adam lived in a world in which the principle of sin was already active, and, therefore, it was a world which now needed *‘religion’*.

Originally, Adam and Eve had no religion. They built no altar; they offered no sacrifice and they needed no priest. The word *‘religion’* comes to us from the Latin *‘re-’again’*, and *‘ligo-’I bind’*. Hence, *‘religion’* is that which *‘binds back’* to God.

But, the first human pair needed none of these, since they had perfect, unhindered fellowship and communion with God. *‘Religion’* only became necessary when that relationship was destroyed.

### **How did Abel come to understand the need for sacrifice – and why did he offer a lamb?**

*The answer to the first question is given in the first two words of Heb.1:2: ‘By faith’. Rom.*

10:17 states that '*Faith comes by hearing the word of God*'. If Abel offered to God '*by faith*', and if what he offered was adjudged '*excellent*' and he, personally, was '*approved as righteous*' by God, the logical conclusion is that he must have been told, by God, what was required from him, because '*Faith comes by hearing*'.

It is also just as logical to conclude that both brothers, Cain, as well as Abel, had received the same instruction from God.

### **The First Recorded Act of Faith.**

Abel, however, holds the distinction of being the first man in human history to have been moved to action '*by faith*'. He was concerned with getting right with God – and *keeping* right with Him. Therefore he acted in a way that was approved by God.

Abel's faith caused him to do something that met with God's approval. And this is not said of Cain. Abel offered a *sacrifice* which the scriptures describe as 'more excellent, or acceptable, than the *offering* brought by Cain.

We should notice this. Cain did not bring a *sacrifice* to God. He brought an *offering* - something which did not involve the shedding of blood and in which there was no acknowledgement of sin, and no admission of guilt. We read in Gen.4:5 that, for Cain and his offering, God had '*no regard*'.

Abel's sacrifice was a lamb, and *this* God accepted, not because of its *quantity*, but because of its *quality*. It involved the shedding of blood. It cost a life. And the Bible tells us, that '*he, being dead, yet speaks*'. Abel's act of faith will always remain a testimony to the truth that salvation is attained through submission to the word and will of God, and through sacrificial blood.

### ***We now go back to the question with which this article begins.***

**We need now to ask ourselves; in what sense does the blood of Christ speak better things than the blood of Abel?**

First, let it be perfectly clear than the blood mentioned in this verse is *the blood of Abel's sacrifice*, and *not* the blood of Abel himself, shed by Cain's violence. This becomes obvious when we study chapter 12 vv.18-24, because this passage reminded the readers of this letter of the great events of Sinai, when the Mosaic covenant was ratified, and when both covenant and people were sanctified by the sprinkled animal blood.

If there is one thing of which the blood of Abel's sacrifice speaks loudly, it is Sin and the Separation which sin creates. His sacrifice spoke of guilt, as did every other sacrifice offered throughout the Patriarchal Age and the Mosaic Age that followed. And, like all the sacrifices made under the Mosaic Law, which, at that time was yet to come, it was a confession of unworthiness before God.

### **The Significance Of Animal Sacrifices.**

Every animal sacrifice that was offered in obedience to the law of God, was, in itself, an admission and confession of guilt. The sacrifice said, in effect: "*I am guilty. I deserved to stand where this animal stands. This sacrifice is my substitute. This blood represents my blood. The life I now offer represents my life.*"

God accepted such sacrifices for what they represented, and received them as an '*atonement*', that is, as '*a covering up*', for this is the meaning of the Hebrew word '*atonement*'. This is why, although each year on the Day of Atonement, the High Priest offered sacrifice for sins, there was no true forgiveness. Because, it was never possible for animal blood to remove human sin, the nation's sins were '*passed over*' for another year, until, at the proper time God's Own Lamb came to '*take away the sin of the world*'.

It is in this sense that the blood of Jesus' sacrifice '*speaks of better things*', or, '*speaks more graciously*', than the blood of Abel's sacrifice.

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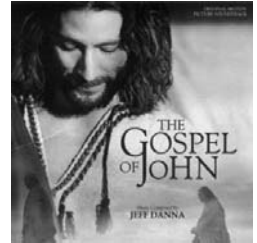
# *Understanding the Life of Jesus*

## *The healing by the Pool of Bethesda.*

(Robert Marsden, Wigan)

This series of articles, based on events in the life of Jesus as recorded in John's gospel, presumes that Jesus' life was the culmination of the unfolding revelation of God's redemptive plan for mankind, a revelation that had started from the very dawn of creation.

The next acts of Jesus that John records after his dialogue with the Samaritan woman are the acts of healing upon the official's son and the healing of the man by the pool of Bethesda. The first of these acts, recorded in John 4 seems to have been a 'straightforward' act of physical healing (if such a remarkable act can ever be justifiably described as straightforward) with no spiritual dimension to it. The fact that Jesus healed without being in the physical presence of the boy, and the later affirmation by the household of the timing of his recovery, which the official knew to be the time that Jesus told him that the boy was healed, are evidence of Jesus' authority over the physical world.



However it is the next act of healing that Jesus performs, the lame man by the pool of Bethesda, that is the subject of this study, because it contains physical, spiritual and theological elements and is of deep significance in the ever more dramatic relationship between Jesus and his Jewish opponents.

### **Background**

Several aspects of the early part of the narrative in John Chapter 5 have been the subject of debate. Precisely which 'pool' is referred to in the narrative (there were several pools around Jerusalem)? Why do some manuscripts omit the idea of the angel troubling the water? If that portion is omitted what is the sense and context of verse 7? Which feast had the Jews gone to Jerusalem to celebrate at the time of this incident?

Of the 3 feasts, Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles, that the Jews were obligated to go Jerusalem to celebrate, the feast of Pentecost seems to be the most likely one here. Commentators suggest that as Passover occurred towards the end of winter, it would be unlikely that people would be lying outside at that time of year. Further, John refers to the feast of Tabernacles a little later in his narrative (though we are not sure of the time elapsed between these parts of the narrative), so it is felt that Tabernacles is unlikely here. However some credence is given to Pentecost, regarded as the most likely occasion, which was associated with the giving of the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai, by the reference that Jesus makes to Moses, recorded in verses 45, 46 of the chapter.

The pool itself is reckoned to have been on the eastern hill of Jerusalem and a pool known as 'the double pool of St Anne' which has been excavated is regarded as the most likely setting. This sizeable pool is in the shape of a trapezoid being 165 feet wide at one end, 220 feet wide at the other and 315 feet long (for reference this is

roughly double the size of an Olympic size swimming pool which I believe is 50 metres, or 165 feet, long and 25 metres, or 82 feet, wide). The double pool reference is that this pool was divided by a central partition and the 4 sides and the central partition would all have rows of columns – hence the 5 porticoes that are referred to.

Many translations omit the second part of verse 3 and the whole of verse 4, and many textual scholars question their authenticity. Check your own Bible, but this is the text that is commonly omitted: "... waiting for the moving of the water; for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool, and troubled the water: whoever stepped in first after the troubling of the water was healed of whatever disease he had." Some feel that these words are omitted simply because they are difficult to explain and certainly the reference to the troubling of the water by the lame man (v7) gives a strong case for their inclusion.

## The lame man healed

John deals with the actual act of healing very quickly. As with many of the incidents in this part of Jesus ministry (Nathaniel, the Samaritan woman, the official's son) Jesus reveals knowledge of the person's circumstances that he could not naturally know. Jesus apparently knew that the man had lain at the pool for a very long time and asked him a simple question: "Do you want to be healed?", to which offer the man simply complains of his inability to get into the water quickly enough when the water is troubled. Ignoring this Jesus tells him: "Rise, take up your pallet and walk." The man does this and, after 38 years of intense frustration and disability, without thanking Jesus or even asking his name, goes on his way.



One writer says of the character of this man: *'If the paralytic's malady were not so tragic, one could almost be amused by the man's unimaginative approach to the curative waters. His crotchety grumbling about the "whippersnappers" who outrace him to the water betrays a chronic inability to seize opportunity, a trait reflected again in his oblique response to Jesus' offer of a cure. The fact that he had let his benefactor slip away without even asking his name is another instance of real dullness. In v14 it is Jesus who takes the initiative in finding the man, and not vice versa. Finally, he repays his benefactor by reporting him to the Jews.'* (Brown, et al)

However there is one decisive fact to this act of healing that far outweighs all others. It rests in the implications for the unfolding revelation of the person and nature of Jesus. That fact is that the healing took place on the Sabbath and as the healed man carried away his bed on that day, he was challenged by the Jews for offending the Sabbath by doing so. They demanded to know who had healed him and, after later learning the identity of his healer, he went and informed the Jews. **"And this is why the Jews persecuted Jesus, because he did this on the Sabbath."**

## The theology that flows from the incident

It is part of the contention underlying this series that the acts of Jesus were not random or instinctive. Here Jesus deliberately heals on the Sabbath. It seems that he probably deliberately sought out the man so that he could be identified to him knowing that the Jews were desperate to know who had healed him and Jesus knew

that they would ultimately get the information. He knew that he would be challenged and that the opportunity to reveal his relationship with the Father would be presented.

There is much that could be said about the Sabbath rest. However one thing that the Jews, confirmed by rabbinical teaching, did acknowledge was that God, as the creator of the world, was not constrained by the words of Exodus 20:11, but they accepted that divine activity continued even on the Sabbath. Men were born and men died on the Sabbath and since God only could give life and only God could deal with the fate of the dead, this meant that God was active on the Sabbath.

This then forms the background to the next, decisive, statement of Jesus: **"My Father is working still, and I am working."** What was Jesus saying to them? Simply this. You Jews accept that God works on the Sabbath. Well I am also claiming the divine prerogative; I am claiming the right to work even as the Father works. This then was the 'crime' of Jesus – not just that he healed on the Sabbath but claimed equality with God as his justification for doing so, something that the Jews simply could not and would not accept. We must remember again that these claims of Jesus were regarded as blasphemy by the Jews and were the cause of the hostile reaction to Jesus both at the time of this incident and throughout his ministry.

What works did Jesus claim the right to do? The self same works that the Father did and which the rabbis themselves recognised as the legitimate work of God – to grant life, and to judge the dead and not just to deal with physical life and judgement, but spiritual life and judgement as well. It is a deft touch by Jesus, recorded in verses 45 and 46 of this chapter, to link the Law of Moses in which the Jews placed so much trust, as the final accusation of their failure to recognise Jesus for who he was (and the juxtaposition of events is even more telling if it was Pentecost, the giving of the Law, that the Jews were gathered to celebrate).

It is worth noting here the words that Jesus spoke to the man that he had healed when he met him, for the second time, in the temple: "See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse befall you." It is unlikely, given what we know about other Scriptures, that Jesus was imputing his previous disability to past sin. Rather Jesus was warning that future sin would lead to something worse than physical ailment - that being the spiritual sickness and death that results from unforgiven sin.

## The nature of Jesus

Can there be any greater testimony to the true nature of Jesus than the words of the Lord himself? Can we doubt that Jesus was very publicly laying claim to his true nature – oneness of purpose with and absolute unity of nature with the Father? Actually there is a greater witness still to the true nature of Jesus. **"But the testimony which I have is greater than that of John; for the works which the Father has granted me to accomplish, these very works which I am doing, bear me witness that the Father has sent me. And the Father who sent me has himself borne witness to me."** (v36) On an occasion of great importance to the Jews, when the city of Jerusalem was filled with many people and word of the actions and words of Jesus was bound to spread like wild fire, Jesus lays absolute claim to his divine heritage. It is another seminal moment in the revelation to the world of the Messiah. To God be the glory!

## **News and Information**

### **Ghana Appeal**

Donations to this Appeal have greatly assisted the growth of the Lord's Church in Ghana. One area with sixteen congregations has many people studying the Bible with them and more bibles have been given to help in this outreach.

In one remote village our brethren have themselves put up a building with four classrooms. As well as giving the children elementary education they are also giving bible instruction. The only contribution they received for this was to purchase roofing sheets.

The preacher's wife at another congregation has survived being bitten twice by the same very large snake. As she was pregnant at the time the treatment needed to save her unborn child was paid through this Appeal. As well as treatment for our brethren, a sister in Christ is receiving continual hospital check ups for mental illness. Her husband formerly travelled to evangelise but, because of failing health, is no longer able to do so and this is causing him severe depression. Your prayers for this couple would be appreciated.

Those wishing to help, please make cheques payable to:

**Dennyloanhead Church of Christ  
Ghana Fund**

and send to treasurer:

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**John Kneller**

## **Correction**

The article in last month's edition by Rose M Payne should have been entitled "The Falling Away" (it actually appeared as The Falling). Apologies to Sis Payne.

## **Coming Events**

### **European Christian Workshop**

**Lancaster University:  
31st August to 2nd September 2006  
Speakers and Subjects:**

<i>Tony Coffey:</i>	Evangelism
<i>Alastair Ferrie:</i>	Working with New Christians
<i>Mark Hill:</i>	Working with Young People



*John Griffiths:* The Multicultural  
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stephen.woodcock@tesco.net

**Paul Halliday: 01633 858868**  
paulhalliday@yahoo.com

*Looking forward to seeing you at  
Lancaster.*

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## Stretford, Manchester

Saturday evening Gospel meetings.  
Each meeting to start at 7.00 p.m.

### September 23rd

*Speaker:* Mark Hill, Loughborough.  
Subject to be announced

### October 21st

Speaker and subject to be announced.

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## Newtongrange, Scotland

The Annual Social will be held on  
**Saturday October 14th, 2006**  
commencing with tea at 1 p.m.

*Speaker:* Bill Cook, Dunfermline.  
A warm welcome awaits all.

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