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THE YEAR BEFORE US

World and local events, the turmoil of the past six months in particular have been unexpected and unprecedented. The world comes to the close of one year and the opening of another in a climate of uncertainty and apprehensiveness. How then should Christians face the New Year?

As a starting point, we can be sure that our Heavenly Father Himself has not changed. Scripture assures us that with Him there "is no variableness, neither shadow of turning" that our dear Saviour Jesus Christ is "the same yesterday, and today, and forever" and that "all the promises of God in Him (Jesus Christ) are yea, and in Him amen, unto the glory of God by us." So we can rest assured that the divine care that has over-shadowed us so far will remain our portion in the future, whatever the outward circumstances.

The Christian cannot be oblivious to the turmoil, upheaval and fear of our world, and may well ponder how these line up with Biblical prophecy. But on the other hand, he or she should not dwell unduly on such unfolding events but rather press on as before in the same narrow way, resting and rejoicing in the Lord, ready to offer help and words of comfort and encouragement to those who may not have the same grounds of assurance as we, if so be that they may also come to know something of the peace of God.

In that spirit, we do well to meditate on our Lord's dealings with us individually and as assemblies of His people over the past year. There may have been setbacks, failures, sorrows and so on, but there will have been evidences of our Father's over-ruling care, the abiding consolation of His Word and the love and fellowship of His people. Perhaps, we need to undertake some personal examination as we reflect on the year soon to be behind us.

Are all our experiences, painful or pleasant, drawing us closer to our Heavenly Father, more totally reliant upon Him, more appreciative of His goodness, more conscious of His far greater wisdom? All the experiences which He allows are for our learning and development, with a view to afterward yielding "the peaceable fruit of righteousness."

Are we finding among the Lord's people a deeper fellowship and a deeper mutual love for all who love the same precious Saviour as we and who are seeking to walk in His steps of love and obedience? It is our Master's will that we love one another as He has loved us, that we be ready to bear one another's burdens and that we be one in spirit as He and the Father are one.

And what of the year ahead? Many people make "new year resolutions" and these can be of help and a stimulus.. The Christian, however, has already one over-riding resolution in his or her vow of consecration, to follow, by grace, in the steps of the Master even unto death. In times of weakness or of doubt, we have the provision - "let us come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need."

Elsewhere in this issue, there is an article by a long time brother in Christ, titled, "God is our Refuge" and based on Psalm 46, which surely must have been composed specifically for our time. How blest we are to know that soon earth's clouds of trouble will part and the great Sun of Righteousness will arise with healing in His beams for all long-suffering mankind. At that time, the glory of God will shine forth to all peoples and nations and tongues and His promise be fulfilled - "I will make the place of my feet glorious!"

May the new year, whatever it may bring, find each one of us more and more praising God for the light of His glory so far received, more and more rejoicing and trusting in His Word of truth, more and more seeking to be changed into the likeness of His dear Son and more and more seeking to show forth the praises of Him who has called us out of darkness into His marvelous light. Whatever our experience, may we 'count it all joy" as He continues His work in us to will and to do of His good pleasure. Amen.

THE YEAR BEFORE US

*For the year before us, O what rich supplies!
For the poor and needy living streams shall rise;
For the sad and sinful shall His grace abound;
For the faint and feeble perfect strength be found.
Onward then, and fear not, children of the Day!
For His word shall never, never pass away!*

(FRH)

In This Issue	
The Year before Us	1
God is our Refuge	2
What is man that thou honourest him thus?	4
The whole Armour of God	7
Faith and Gratitude	11

God Is Our Refuge

(Psalm 46)

David, the writer of very many of the Psalms, is said to have been "a man after God's own heart" and yet he knew what it was to be in trouble. Some of this had been caused by his own weakness and imperfections, and some by his enemies. David had learned, however, that even though the trouble was due to his own sin, he could depend on the Lord to help him as soon as he confessed and sought forgiveness. He had learned too that no matter how powerful or numerous his enemies were, God was an "ever present help" and would never forsake him. Thus David, the beloved of God, was well equipped because of his own experiences to testify to the Lord's abounding grace and his watchcare over His faithful people.

But the Psalms are much more than the personal testimony of a great man of God, they are prophetic. As a prophet of the Lord, David was inspired to write vitally important truths concerning Jesus Christ and the Church of this gospel age, including the manner in which God would deal with them and the experiences through which they would pass. David himself was also typical of the Church during the gospel age, which would also experience troubles. Sometimes these come through our own weaknesses and imperfections, others come to us also through the enemies of God and in various other ways. These all go to test the faith of the Christian, just as with David.

Psalm 46, in particular, has evident special reference to the end of the Gospel Age and should be a great help to the Lord's people, giving them strength and encouragement down at this time. **Verses 2 and 3** of the psalm read – "*Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea; though the waters thereof roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof.*" All the prophetic testimony of scripture agrees that the "removal" of the earth is at the end of the gospel age,

The apostle Peter speaks of this time – "*But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up.*" (2 Peter 3:10) It is of course the symbolic earth that is referred to and it is clear to us that this has been in progress for some considerable time. The "mountains" are indeed being carried into the depths of the "sea". One after another the mountains (or kingdoms) are being brought down into the hands of the people. It is not that these kingdoms are being wholly dissolved as yet, but rather the reins of government of these nations are rapidly fal-

ling into the hands of a radical discontented faction which is slowly destroying the old order of earthly governments.

The ever-running tide of discontent which comes from selfishness and the increase of knowledge in this time called in scripture "the time of the end" are evident pointers to the inevitable downfall of the present social order and today we see the hearts of many people are filled with fear. Jesus Himself said that this would be so at the end of the age –

"There shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars, and upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity, men's hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth, for the powers of heaven shall be shaken." (Luke 21:25,26)

It would seem that these very conditions exist in the world today. This is evident from the daily newspapers. (This article was written some years ago and the nations' leaders were concerned then over the potential of atomic warfare to wipe out mankind. Today other more dramatic and devastating weapons and philosophies are current and the same personal forebodings and national fears still prevail.) But the Psalmist says that even in those circumstances – "*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble, therefore will not we fear.*"

The world of mankind indeed fear when they see the removal of everything in which their hopes and security centred. This is because they do not see or know of the glorious new day that is to follow the great time of trouble. For there is hope for the world as well as the Church. The exhortation to us, as our Lord Himself said, is – "*When these things begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads, for your deliverance draweth nigh.*" (Luke 21:28)

It is evident then that these words apply to the conditions in the world today and it is also true that it applies to the Lord's people today. God has not promised to spare His people from all troubles, but to be with them as a present help in the increasing darkness of the night time that is now settling down upon the world. If our faith is lacking, it is possible that we may only look to Him in the bright and happy experiences of life. But let us remember that God often speaks to us out of the darkness, that is, in our severest trials and testings there are valuable lessons that He wishes us to learn.

We must not expect Him necessarily to spare us but to

help us for God deals with each one of us individually and we all need His help in time of trouble. The present time is a time of stress which taxes our powers of endurance. The tension and excitement of this age, of the rushing to and fro, cannot but have its effect on our nervous systems and tend to take away our peace and rest of heart. So we have special need of the Lord's sustaining grace. May our rest of faith in Him be then so complete at all times that no matter what conditions of excitement and turmoil may develop around us, we will still be able to rejoice in the blessed assurance that He knows and cares.

Verse 4 reads – *“There is a river, the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God, the holy place of the tabernacles of the Most High.”* This gives us a picture of the blessings of life and happiness that will flow to all people through the administration of the Messianic Kingdom. This would surely be the same river of water of life that is spoken of in Rev 22:1,2 – *“And He showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bore twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month, and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.”*

As yet, this river of life has not begun to flow, but it serves to remind us of the great objective of God's plan, which is the blessing of all the families of the earth. Psalm 46 is firstly a message of encouragement to the Lord's people, especially down at the end of the age, but He would not have us forget that His blessings upon us are preparatory and for the blessing of all mankind. Despite the ever present threats and dangers of our time, we have the assurance that there will in due time be an opportunity for life for all mankind. Therefore we will **not** fear.

Verse 5 continues – *“God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved; God shall help her, and that right early.”* The marginal reading of the last portion of the verse is – *“when the morning cometh”*, or in other versions – *“in the dawning of her morning”*. There is a contrast here, the Psalmist sees a picture of trouble affecting the whole world, a time of upheaval such that the social order is about to disappear and men's hearts failing them for fear. Yet he sees something that is not moved – God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved.

This would seem to point to the Church of this present time, who are not moved as others because of their faith in and reliance upon God's promises. The apostle Paul gives a similar blessed assurance in Heb 12:27,28 – *“This word, Yet once more, signifieth the removing of those things that are shaken, as of things that are made, that those things which cannot be shaken may remain. Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God*

acceptably with reverence and godly fear.”

“God shall help her and that right early”. It seems that this may refer to the glorification of the final members of the Church. God has promised His help and strength all along the way and He has also given us assurance of His help in the final deliverance of the Church when it is complete. The apostle's words in Eph 1:19,20 tell us – *“(that ye may know) what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power, which He wrought in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead, and set Him at His own right hand in the heavenly places.”*

So then, we have the assurance of divine help not only in present troubles but right through until our deliverance in the first resurrection, promised to all His faithful children. We do not know just how much longer it will be before the last members of the Church are gathered home beyond the veil, it is better that we do not know. God has apparently purposely withheld that knowledge from us in order that our consecration may be something not made dependent upon time limits but wholehearted and made even unto death, leaving it to our Father to determine when and how it will be consummated.

May the words of the Psalmist help us to appreciate God's special provision for His people in these last days, for truly – *“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble”* and our Lord's words for such times as these – *“When these things begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads, for your deliverance draweth nigh!”*

(From an address by our late Bro Joe Hiam first presented Christmas Day 1953)

***GOD is the refuge of His saints
When storms of sharp distress invade;
Ere we can offer our complaints,
Behold Him present with His aid.***

***There is a stream, whose gentle flow
Supplies the city of our God
With peace, and joy and blessing now,
E'en in our narrow trial road.***

***That sacred stream, Thy holy Word,
Our grief allays, our fear controls;
Sweet peace Thy promises afford,
And give new strength to fainting souls.***

Bible Students Hymnal

WHAT IS MAN THAT THOU HONoureTH HIM THUS?

"And no man taketh this honour unto himself, but he that is called of God, as was Aaron". (Heb 5:4)

This verse is speaking of our Great High Priest the Lord Jesus, Aaron's antitype, nevertheless the Scriptures clearly show that the same principle applies to each of us. Christ's body members also do not take this honour unto themselves, as Jesus said in John 15:16 – *"Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain: that whatsoever shall ask of the Father in my name, he may give it you."*

The Calling

The Heavenly Father calls Christ's Bride, He draws them and gives them to Christ as we read in John 6:44 – *"No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day"* and again in John 17:6 – *"I have manifested thy name unto the men which thou gavest me out of the world; thine they were, and thou gavest them me; and they have kept thy word."*

This great work of our Heavenly Father has been in progress throughout the entire Gospel Age and still continues on, as we see by the words of Peter in Acts 2:39 – *"For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call"*.

Our Heavenly Father had countless legions of mighty angels to choose from but He chose for His purposes from Adam's descendants - lowly fallen mankind. So we might well ask the question "what is man that Thou honourest him thus?" What is this great honour that we have been called to and why is God making His selection from fallen mankind?

The calling is indeed unique, something very special, we could say priceless. Let us look at Paul's words in Phil. 3:14 – *"I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."* (A.V.) We are being told two things here, firstly that our calling is a high calling and secondly that there is a prize to the winners; these winners are the overcomers. The word translated "high" basically means above or upward and the commentator Albert Barnes says: "it is a call from Heaven and to Heaven".. Today's English Version reads, *"So I run straight towards the goal in order to win the prize, which is God's call through Christ Jesus to the life above"*

The word mark (A.V.) means goal, the goal is the thing that we aim for. To win the prize of the high calling is our goal in life, we have recognised its great value, something of surpassing worth, so that we are prepared to give up our earthly life rights in order to obtain it. It is certainly a high calling in the sense of its great worth, though the meaning of the word high would have more the thought of a heavenly calling as mentioned in Heb.3:1 – *"Wherefore Holy Brethren partakers of the Heavenly calling...."*

In Isa 64:4, we read – *For since the beginning of the world men have not heard, nor perceived by the ear, neither hath*

the eye seen, O God, beside thee, what he hath prepared for him that waiteth for him. The Apostle Paul quotes this verse in 1 Cor. 2:9, but not word for word. – *But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him.* Then in verse 10 he goes on to say – *But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God.*

The words of 2 Peter 1:4 link in well with this verse – *Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.* When we fully understand what our gracious Heavenly Father has in store for us we realise that they are indeed great and precious promises, Jesus describes the prize of the High Calling as being like treasure or a pearl of great price in Mat 13:44-46 – *Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto treasure hid in a field; the which when a man hath found, he hideth, and for joy thereof goeth and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchant man, seeking goodly pearls: who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had, and bought it.*

Jesus spoke these parables to illustrate the very great value of that which the Heavenly Father was offering; the value was so great that the merchant man was prepared to sell all that he had in order to obtain it. This Parable is a good illustration of our Master's words in Luke 14:33 – *So likewise, whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple.* The man in these parables could represent both Jesus and the Church. Our Master literally gave up all that He had. We must give up all our earthly hopes, aims, ambitions and desires and put the Kingdom of Heaven first in our lives, as Paul said in Col 3:1-3 – *Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth, for ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God.*

Our Master's words in Matt. 6:19-21 fit in very well with this passage, and also with the thought of treasure – *Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.* How beautifully the Scriptures link together and harmonise with each other!

The Honour

Earlier the question was raised as to what this great honour is that we have been called to, or in other words, what is the purpose of our call, and why is God making His selection from fallen man?. One of the purposes of the call is to assist in the great restitution work, as the Apostle Paul says in Romans 8:19 – *the Creation is waiting for the manifestation of the sons of God.* The sons of God are firstly Jesus and also the Church. The world is unknowingly waiting for this time,

they are all waiting for a better time to come. The coming Kingdom under the guidance of the sons of God will fulfil their desire, as we see in Haggai 2:7 - *And I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come: and I will fill this house with glory, saith the LORD of hosts.*

The Lord's people are looked upon as firstborn sons of God and Hebrews 12:23 refers to the Church of the firstborn. The rest of God's family will be born in the resurrection during the next age.

The word Church is a translation of the Greek word *ekklesia* which appears 115 times (in the Greek mss). It is translated Church 112 times, and Assembly 3 times. The basic meaning of the word is "that which is called out". While the word Church appears so many times, only this once in Hebrews is it styled Church of the Firstborn. God has only one true Church on earth whose members are known to Him, so wherever in the Scriptures we see the word Church it refers to this same Church of the Firstborn. The book of Hebrews was of course written to the Jewish converts out of the nation of Israel, this could perhaps be part of the reason why the term Firstborn is used here. When we understand their customs under the patriarchal arrangements and certain features of their law we realise that this term could have a great deal of meaning to the Jewish Brethren (at that day) and, when we fully understand it, great significance to us also. Under the patriarchal arrangements the firstborn son of a family held a very privileged position, he was the principle heir, it was to him that the birthright belonged.

The words of a Bible scholar on the subject of the birthright read - "It is the right that naturally belonged to the father's firstborn son. Under the Patriarchal system the oldest son became the head of the family upon the death of the father with authority over the others as long as they were in the household; he was responsible to care for members of his father's household, he also succeeded to the father's position in representing the family before God; the firstborn generally received the father's special blessing, moreover he was entitled to two parts of the family estate, that is he received twice as much as each of his brethren. Under the Mosaic law a man with more than one wife could not take the birthright from the oldest son and give it to the son of a specially loved wife (see Deut. 21:15-17.)"

This surely is a beautiful illustration of the Church of the Firstborn in the next age. What a lovely thought that the firstborn son was responsible to care for members of his father's household. This is what our calling is all about - for the first 1000 years of our life with Christ, we are to have the responsibility of caring for members of our Heavenly Father's household in His earthly family; We note that in Israel they were cared for while they remained in the household, the thought could be that when they became mature and moved out they no longer required this care. Just so it may well be with God's earthly family, by the end of the Millennium they will be mature and will have learnt righteousness and the rewards it brings.

The Choice

The other question earlier asked was:- "Why did God make His selection from members of the fallen race rather than from members of the angelic hosts?" The Scriptures answer this question so far as Jesus is concerned, the same answer

would be applicable for His body members. Why did He have to spend three and a half years on earth? He could have come down from Heaven, provided the Ransom and returned straight to Heaven. We read in Hebrews 2:16-18 - *For verily he took not on him the nature of angels; but he took on him the seed of Abraham. wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people. For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted.* And in Hebrews 4:15 we read - *For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.*

In John 5:27, Jesus said that the Father had given Him authority to execute judgment also because He is the Son of Man - it was because He was the Son of man that He was given this authority. It was His going through all the experiences common to mankind and His partaking of their suffering, that fitted Him for the exalted position that He was to hold and made Him a merciful High Priest. Does not that explain the reason why our Heavenly Father has selected from fallen mankind for Christ's Bride, to be the underpriests? They are also to share in the judging work of the next age, so they too must become merciful underpriests like their great High Priest, the Lord Jesus. We often hear someone who has been through a very difficult or trying experience say "you just would not understand unless you had been through it for yourself". So we must go through it for ourselves so that we can have understanding and compassion in our work in the coming age for our Heavenly Father's earthly family.

We have now seen the main purpose of our calling for the first thousand years of our life with Christ. But 1000 years is a mere drop in the great ocean of eternity that will lie before us. So we can realise that God has other purposes in selecting the Church as well as the work of the first 1000 years. Indeed, He is selecting a special family to live on His own plane of existence, to be like their elder Brother Jesus and to see Him as He is in His glorious spiritual body, to put on immortality, to be partakers of the Divine Nature, God's Nature. (1 John 3:2, 1 Cor. 15:53, 2 Peter 1:4.)

If we are to fully appreciate the magnitude and greatness of that which our loving Heavenly Father is offering us, we need to understand the meaning of immortality and the difference between it and simply everlasting life. Let us read 1 Timothy 6:16 - *Who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see: to whom be honour and power everlasting. Amen.* Originally Almighty God was the only being to possess immortality but this He shared with His only begotten Son the Lord Jesus, as Jesus said in John 5:26, *"As the Father hath life in Himself so He gives to the Son to have life in Himself"*

Jesus in His prehuman existence as the Logos possessed everlasting life as did all the angels, He would have had the same nature as they. Jesus is saying here that His Heavenly Father was now going to give Him the same nature that He possessed, that is inherent life in Himself, a life that needed no outside influence to sustain it, His resurrection was to the

Immortal Divine Nature, He then became the first being other than the Heavenly Father to partake of this nature. We have all been called in the one hope of our calling. We are all running in the same race for the same prize, as Paul said in Eph. 4:4 - *There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling.*

The Prize

This hope is of becoming members of our Heavenly Father's family for all eternity, this is the hope before us if faithful unto death, as Jesus said in Rev. 2:10, reading in part - "*Be thou faithful unto death and I will give thee a crown of life*". The original Greek text as in literal translations is more specific - it reads "*the crown of the life*". The life would be that special immortal life that has been promised to the over-comers. When we realise that only the Heavenly Father and His Son possess immortality, we can fully appreciate the greatness of that which we have been promised.

We have sometimes heard it said that we should not be thinking about the reward that we are to receive, the prize that is waiting at the end of the way, rather we should be serving without thought of a reward. It is true that we should be serving because we have been taken into our Heavenly Father's confidence and shown His glorious Plan, a Plan that centres in Jesus Christ and displays the great love of Father and Son; For this very reason, we wish to serve because we love them in return and we love that wonderful Plan of Salvation because it offers the opportunity of life eternal to all the human race and we desire to have a small part in completing that great work.

But at the same time it would be a wrong thought to suggest that we should not be thinking about or talking about the great reward that has been offered to us. To give an illustration, let us suppose a son had a birthday coming up and his father offered him a very expensive and special present for when his birthday came along and told his son all about it. Let us suppose that the son never ever thought about the present, never ever spoke to his father about it. How do you suppose the Father would feel, what thoughts would go through his mind? He surely would wonder if the boy really appreciated the gift, did he really want it. It would be a very disappointing situation for the father, perhaps he might change his mind and not give the gift after all.

Just so with our Heavenly Father, He wants us to show that we really appreciate all that He is offering us, that we really do want it. We think of Moses and how he appreciated the reward that God had in store for him. Let us look at Heb. 11:26 - *Esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompense of the reward.* We also should have very great respect for the priceless gift that has been offered to us. We are to be part of God's Family, sons of God, living on His own plane of existence. God has many sons, the angels are described as sons of God, Adam is referred to as a son of God; at the end of the millennium all the obedient of mankind will be Sons of God. But we are special sons, begotten of God, begotten at the present time and eventually born on the Divine plane in the first resurrection. While God will ultimately have a large family of many sons, only the "little flock" will share His nature.

As we saw before, 1 John 3:2 says, "now are we sons of God", (that is, begotten of God), Romans 8:23 speaks of the time when we receive our change, saying in part, that we are waiting for the adoption, to wit the redemption of our body. Phillip's translation renders the last part of this verse; "*we wait for the redemption of our bodies which will mean that we have realised our full Sonship in Him*". This of course will be the other side of the veil. We might prefer the word - Sonship, which some other translations give, instead of adoption. (AV) Young's Concordance gives the meaning of the Greek as "placing as a son". Adoption perhaps gives the thought of not a true son, as is the case with human adoptions, but no such thought is intended here, as we have seen, we are sons in the highest sense.

The Criteria

Who is God calling, what criteria does He use in making His selection? Looking at it from the worldly point of view, we might think that He would choose from the very cream of society as it were, those who were as near perfect as possible, those who had never put a foot wrong. But of course we know that is not the case, as we see in 1 Cor. 1:26-29, *For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called, but God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; and base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are, that no flesh should glory in his presence.* In 1 Cor. 6:9,10, the Apostle Paul lists some of the worst sins and crimes, then in verse 11 he says; "and such were some of you." Of course, there had to be a change after they came into Christ but we see that frequently God calls those who humanly speaking appear quite poor material.

Some have suggested that God is making a random selection for no particular reason, but this does not seem logical. There are very many good and lovely people in the world who cannot understand the Plan of God, suggesting that they have not been called. While our Heavenly Father is selecting what seems to human eyes quite unpromising material, only He can read the hearts and see that He can make something out of them. They could be pliable clay and be prepared to yield themselves in the hands of the Master Potter, God cannot use those who are stubborn and self-willed, those who want to "do their own thing" If we should start to develop pride and think that we are something, we become unsuitable material.

The words of the hymn describe very well what our attitude should be, "O! to be nothing, nothing, only to lie at His feet, a broken and emptied vessel, for the Master's use made meet. Emptied that He might fill me, as forth to His service I go, broken that so unhindered His life through me might flow." Note the apostle's words in 1 Peter 5:6 - *Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God that He may exalt you in due time.*

May we all remain yielding and pliable clay in the Master Potter's hands, that we may in due time be granted a place in our Heavenly Father's house above, that place which Jesus is preparing for us. Amen.

THE WHOLE ARMOUR OF GOD

(Eph 6:11 – 18)

The text is taken from part of Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus. Paul realised that the Christians at Ephesus had come a long way from when they first heard the message of the gospel and acknowledges this in his letter. Paul is about to finish his letter when he turns his attention to the greatness of the struggle that lay before them, they were now in danger of being snared by the schemes of the devil. We read in Eph 6:11. *"Put on the (whole) full armour of God, that you may be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil"* NAS.

This message certainly is as true today at the end of the Gospel Age as it was when Paul first wrote to the brethren at Ephesus. The devil's schemes are just as treacherous now as they were 2000 years ago, maybe even more so. Satan's attacks on the Church members at this time are even more subtle, often involving our families, work or people that we may consider as brethren. These can undermine our resolve to follow Christ and the will of Our Heavenly Father. We have the example in Matt 16:21-23 when our Lord introduced the disciples to the fact he was to "be killed, and be raised up on the third day". Peter, no doubt with good intentions said "God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to you." Jesus had to rebuke Peter for trying to sway him from following his Father's will. "He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's." (NAS) People with good intentions that are contrary to God's will for us can sway us from the Narrow Way.

Paul wrote the Epistle to the Ephesians from his prison cell in Rome. He would have had a Roman soldier guarding his room and possibly even had the guard chained to him. This is indicated later in Eph 6:20 "for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in proclaiming it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak". (NAS). Paul was literally an envoy in chains; this experience gave him the picture to draw for us on what we require to be on our guard. Paul noted the protective armour of his Roman guard in great detail. He noted that each piece of armour had been designed for a particular purpose and he was able to relate these to the different pieces of armour that our Heavenly Father provides for us.

If we are not totally equipped with our divine armour, like the Roman soldier we are at great risk of having our defences penetrated by the Adversary. This happens when we rely on our own defences instead of relying on our Lord and our Heavenly Father. Rom 13:12 urges us to "put on the armour of light". We have to remember that the armour is not a useless weight that we are required to wear, but that each and every piece is necessary for us in the battles that lie ahead.

The Adversary

That we may "be able to stand" is the thought of the Christian firstly being able to hold out against the schemes of the Devil, and then with experience and prayer to overcome the schemes of the devil, so that from our experiences we may

grow and also be able to help others to grow. We not only have to reach the mark, we have to stand firm, not be moved.

The word in our text translated schemes or wiles is only used twice in the bible, the other place being Eph 4:14 "That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they **lie in wait** to deceive." Paul appropriately uses this word in these contexts, The Greek has the meaning of cunning devices, arts, attempts to delude or destroy. Satan uses various arts and stratagems (military manoeuvres designed to deceive or surprise an enemy), which he employs to drag us down. It is much easier for us to recognise and defend ourselves when the attack is direct and out in the open.

Satan does not carry on an open warfare against us; he does not meet Christian soldiers face to face, this would be easier for us. He advances covertly, he uses the cover of darkness, (when we are low and discouraged), employing cunning rather than power, he seeks to delude and betray rather than to take us by mere force. Sometimes he uses lures of the world, pleasures that seem harmless at first that can lead to our indulgence at the expense of our Christian development.

We have the example of our Lord in Matt 4:1-3 "Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He then became hungry. And the tempter came and said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread." (NAS). Satan waited until our Lord was weak from fasting before he approached and tried to tempt him. In each case Jesus used scripture, "the true word of God" to rebut him.

In Verse 12, Paul tells us that we wrestle not against flesh and blood but against a much greater power, the rulers of darkness of this world, spiritual wickedness in high places. Paul seems to use the example of wrestling taken from the ancient games in Greece. The Greek word translated wrestling has the thought of a struggle, fight or combat. It does not mean that as Christians we will have no enemies amongst men, there will be those that oppose us and those that persecute us but these are nowhere near the danger that Satan presents to the new creature.

Paul told the church at Corinth in 2 Cor 10:3-4 "For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses." (NAS) Paul is confirming to us the great disadvantage that we have in this contest. We are fighting against a much greater power than ourselves, the adversary. If we are to stand against the evil day, if we are to be overcomers, we require the Whole Armour of God, not part of it, so as to leave ourselves open to attack, but every piece that God provides is necessary for our protection. It is provided freely for us, but we have to accept the gift from God

The Armour

Let us take each piece of this armour and glean the lessons that Paul had for the Christians at Ephesus and how they apply to us nearly 2000 years after they were first written. We note at the beginning of verse 14 that we are "to stand". Paul tells us that the armour is for defence, for our protection, not for attacking. This role is left to God as Paul explains to the Romans in Rom 12:17-19. "Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord". (NAS) Therefore each piece of the armour will be looked at for its defensive role in protecting the Christian

The first part of the armour mentioned in verse 14 is "*having girded your loins with truth*". The clothing at the time consisted of loose, flowing robes. It was necessary to gird them up to stop them getting in the way for the journey or task at hand. Isaiah when describing Our Lord said, "righteousness shall be the girdle of his loins" Isa 11:5. We are told to gird our loins with truth, the sustaining strength that we derive from an understanding of God's plan. Peter gives us more insight in to this girding up or bracing and strengthening ourselves. 1 Pet 1:13 "Wherefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and hope to the end for the grace that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ"; (KJV)

The girdle is used to keep other parts of the garment in place, so we need a strong basis for the truth that we all hold so dear, so as to give consistency and firmness to our conduct. Jesus just before his death prayed to his Heavenly Father saying in John 17:15-17 "I do not ask Thee to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one. "They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; Thy word is truth". (NAS) The truth is in the spirit of the word, -- its meaning, its intention, its real essence. This does not come from just reading the Bible; it comes from studying the Bible, not only by ourselves, but also with other like-minded people, to gain from their experiences. We also need to pray to our Heavenly Father to give us the right heart condition to accept the guiding of the Holy Spirit that we need to understand what we read. Prov 2:6 says "For the Lord gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding". (NAS)

This thought is expanded on by Paul in 1 Cor 2:9-12 "but just as it is written, Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and which have not entered the heart of man, all that God has prepared for those who love Him. For to us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man, which is in him? Even so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is from God, that we might know the things freely given to us by God", So we can see the importance of having our loins girded with the Truth, we need a sound grounding in the word of God and this can only come by us taking the time to improve our understanding of the deeper meanings contained in the bible,

so that we are not easily swayed by the adversary.

The next part of the Armour is "*the breastplate of righteousness*", Vines tells us that the Greek word is thorax, primarily, "the breast," but in our verse denotes "a breastplate or corselet," consisting of two parts and protecting the body on both sides, from the neck to the middle. It consists of two parts, front and back, which formed the coat of mail (an alternative term for the word in the NT sense). It was made of rings, or in the forms of scales or of plates, often of brass, which were fastened together in such a way as to be flexible and yet guard the vital organs from attack. It is interesting to note that Goliath's coat of mail weighed approx 73 kilograms..

The righteousness in our verse does not refer to our own righteousness; this is unattainable as we are unable to keep God's law or to have any merit of our own. This meaning of the Greek word dikaiosune is "right action", and is frequently used by Paul. The word was originally *rightwiseness*. Paul tells us that it is a gracious gift of God to men whereby all who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ are brought into right relationship with God. This righteousness is only obtainable through faith in Christ.... The man who trusts in Christ becomes 'the righteousness of God in Him,' (2 Cor. 5:21), and Paul further expands this thought in Phil 3:9 "(that I) may be found in Him (Christ), not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith," We become in Christ all that God requires us to be, all that we could never be in ourselves. Abraham accepted the Word of God, making it his own by that act of the mind and spirit which is called faith, and, as the sequel showed, submitted himself to its control, therefore God accepted him as one who fulfilled the whole of His requirements, Rom 4:3 "For what does the Scripture say? "And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." (NAS)

The righteousness of Christ implanted in us is our breastplate to fortify the heart against the attacks which Satan makes against us. The apostle expands the thought of the breastplate in 1 Thes. 5:8, "Putting on the breastplate of faith and love". Faith and love include all Christian graces; for by faith we are united to Christ and his righteousness and by love to our brethren. This means that we have to be diligent in observance of our duty to our Heavenly Father, and have an honest behaviour towards men, in all the offices of justice, truth, and love.

As imperfect vessels we have to remember not only to put on our breastplate, but to make sure that it is fitted correctly. Ahab the King of Israel, when Elijah was the prophet, was killed even though he had on his breastplate as we are told in 1 King 22:34 "Now a certain man drew his bow at random and struck the king of Israel in a joint of the armour." The wound was fatal; Ahab had turned away from God and followed other gods. We have to make sure that we do not have some defect of character, some point that is unguarded, because that will be the point of attack by the adversary.

We have other examples in the Bible, which show the need for the breastplate to fit correctly. Judas through his greed

and dishonesty of character allowed Satan to enter and to lead him to betray our Lord. Peter through his impulsiveness denied Christ three times, though he was later restored by Jesus. Sometimes the attacks that we let through our armour only wound us and like Peter we can learn from them, but some like the wound in Judas are fatal. So we can see that we need righteousness of heart, of will or intent, so that we are in the right condition to accept the imputation of Christ's righteousness, to make us perfectly protected from all the arrows of our foe.

The next instruction that Paul gives us is in verse 15 *"having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace"*. (NAS). The words "having shod your feet" in the Greek are literally "having under bound the feet", or the binding on of sandals. The protection of the feet and ankles consisted of two parts. Firstly the sandals to cover the feet and these were often fitted with spikes to help the soldier to stand firm and secondly greaves fitted around the legs to deflect weapons. We are told that Goliath wore these in 1 Sam 17:6 "He also had bronze greaves on his legs" when he went into battle against Israel. These are used to defend against the gall-traps, and sharp sticks, which were traps (snares) set on the paths to obstruct the marching of the enemy; those who fell upon them were unfit to march and became a burden to the other soldiers.

The word rendered preparation has the meaning of readiness, fitness for, or eagerness. This means we have to be ready, properly equipped to preach the gospel, the gospel of peace. We need the right frame of heart, to adhere to the gospel and abide by it, which enables us to walk with a steady pace on the narrow way, notwithstanding the difficulties and dangers that may be on it. It is styled the gospel of peace because it brings peace, peace with God, peace within, and peace with one another. Paul writing to the Romans in 10:15, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring glad tidings of good things!" taking the words originally spoken by Isaiah. Paul further expands the thought of the gospel of peace in 2 Cor 5:18-21 "Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ, and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were entreating through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." (NAS)

We have to be ready for the combat, being shod with the gospel of peace. We have to endeavour also to spread the Gospel of peace, having quietness of mind. We have to be careful not to be easily provoked, or prone to quarrelling. We have to show all gentleness and all long-suffering to all those to whom we introduce the gospel. If we take this approach it will help to preserve us from many temptations and persecutions, as did the shoes of brass the soldiers from gall traps, etc.

The next part of the armour provided by our Heavenly Father is *the shield of faith*. Paul tells us in vs16 "in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be

able to extinguish all the flaming missiles of the evil one" The words (NAS) "in addition to" give a better understanding to what Paul meant than the (KJV) words "above all". The thought is not that the shield is more important or valuable than the other armour, but that it is in addition to the other armour. Its advantage to the soldier is that it is mobile, able to be moved from side to side, plus it is held away from the body to deflect darts.

This shield is not the small shield used for attacking and hand to hand combat; Paul was very specific in his choice of words. Vines tells us the word *thureos* first of all had the meaning of "a stone for closing the entrance of a cave"; but then the meaning of the word changed to, "a shield, a large and oblong shape, protecting every part of the soldier".. It was made sometimes of willow branches twisted together, sometimes of other wood, covered with ox hides several folds thick which were frequently oiled, so that the arrows or darts would glance off or rebound. The modern version of the shield would be like the riot shield that we see police forces using today.

The word is used metaphorically of faith, Eph. 6:16, which the believer is to use in addition to all the other armour, i. e., as affecting the whole of his activities. Faith is all in all to us in the hour of temptation. The breastplate secures the vitals; but with the shield we turn every way. John in his first epistle 5:4 tells us "For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world-- our faith". (NAS) We are to be fully persuaded of the truth of all God's promises, as Paul tells us in Heb 11:1 "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen". (NAS)

Faith is like a shield, a sort of universal defence against the adversary who tries to lead us away from God. His temptations have the same characteristics as darts; they are swift and have uncertain flight paths. They were also fiery darts, so as to inflict the maximum damage to the intended victim. The darts were made from slender pieces of cane filled with combustible material; a favourite weapon used for ambushes. In Num 21:6-8 we read "And the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. So the people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned, because we have spoken against the Lord and you; intercede with the Lord, that He may remove the serpents from us." And Moses interceded for the people. Then the Lord said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a standard; and it shall come about, that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, he shall live." (NAS) Faith is our shield with which we must quench the fiery darts, with which Satan tries to ambush us, that is, faith, acting upon the word of God and applying it in our every day lives, quenches the darts of temptation.

The next verse tells us to "take *the helmet of salvation*". The word translated "take" has more the meaning of "heartiness in taking". So we are to whole-heartedly take the helmet of salvation that is, hope, which has salvation as its object; as we are told in 1 Thes. 5:8: The helmet was a cap made from thick leather or brass to guard the head from attack. It secured the head, a vital part. It is interesting that soldiers will not stand their ground unless there is a hope of

victory. As followers of Christ we could not stand if it were not for the "living hope" which we have "through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead". Not only a lively hope, but the hope of "an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you", a good hope of salvation, well founded and well built, which will both purify us and keep us from being led astray by Satan. (1 Pet 1:3-4) He could tempt us to despair; without this lively hope of salvation, but if we keep trusting in God, and rejoicing in him, we can take comfort in the words of David in Ps 18:2-3 "The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge; my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. I call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised, and I am saved from my enemies". (NAS)

The last piece of the armour Paul mentioned is "*the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God*". The sword mentioned here was "a short sword or dagger" which is distinct from "a sword of large size and length." It is of interest to note that our Lord is said to wield the much larger sword as an instrument of anguish, as in Luke 2:35 or of judgment, as in Rev. 1:16; 2:12,16; 19:15,21. The sword was an essential part of the soldier's armour. Without the sword no soldier would have regarded himself as well armed. So to the Christian the word of God is very necessary, without it he cannot maintain the spiritual warfare, he can have no success without it. It is called the sword of the Spirit, because our weapons are not carnal but spiritual as we are told in 2 Cor 10:3-5: "For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ." (NAS) We cannot rely on our own reason or wisdom. Often a single text of scripture is what we need to fight off temptation more than all wisdom that natural man can muster. We have to remember that the adversary is also acquainted with scripture and can reason and reason plausibly, as in his tempting of our Lord in the wilderness. (Matt 4)

Our greatest defence against the adversary is the same as our Lord's - "It is written" as he cannot resist a direct and positive command of the Almighty. We like David need to say "With my whole heart have I sought thee: O let me not wander from thy commandments. Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee. Blessed art thou, O Lord: teach me thy statutes". Ps 119:10-12 KJV Often we are discouraged when we use the word of God in our defence., it appears to have achieved nothing, even to have made the problem worse. When we are thinking that God's word is ineffective, we need to remember Isaiah's words in Isa 55:11 "So shall My word be which goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it". (NAS) The words may not have accomplished what we wanted but God assures us that they will achieve his will in due time.

We also have the promise to the Hebrews in Heb 4:12 "For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any

two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart". One of the problems that we can all face is finding the appropriate words for the situation that we find ourselves in. Jesus gave the following words of comfort in Matt 10:17-20 "Beware of men; for they will deliver you up to the courts, and scourge you in their synagogues; and you shall even be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles. But when they deliver you up, do not become anxious about how or what you will speak; for it shall be given you in that hour what you are to speak, for it is not you who speak, but it is the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you. (NAS)

Prayer

This completes the armour that God has provided. However just as soldiers in battle, who are without instructions from their Headquarters, are ineffective and at risk of being overrun by the enemy, so we too have to be in constant contact with our Heavenly Father through our Lord Jesus Christ. Prayer buckles all the other parts of our Christian armour. We must join prayer with all these graces mentioned in the armour of God, as our defence against spiritual enemies, imploring our Heavenly Father for help and assistance, as the case requires. We must pray in the Spirit; we must be on watch, endeavouring to keep our hearts in the right condition for the duties that Our Heavenly Father may give us. We must pray always, but the thought is not of continual praying for there are other duties such as study and praise and we also have our respective obligations in the world that have to be met in their place and season; but we should keep up constant times of prayer, and be consistent with them. We must pray upon all occasions, and as often as our own and others' necessities require it of us. We must keep up prayer, and should intermix prayers with our other duties. We must pray with all prayer and supplication, with all kinds of prayer: public, private, and secret, petition for mercy, and thanksgivings, for favours received. When God says, Seek my face, our hearts must comply, (Ps. 27:8). We must abide by the duty of prayer, whatever change there may be in our outward circumstances; and we must continue in it as long as we live in the world. We must pray with supplication. not for ourselves only, but for all saints; for we are members one of another.

Prayer crowns all our lawful efforts with success and gives a victory even against seemingly impossible odds, for as we are told in Rom 8:31 "If God is for us, who is against us?" (NAS)

*And if to warfare He calls me forth,
He buckles my armour on,
He greets me with smiles and a word of cheer
For battles His Sword hath won;
He wipes my brow, as I droop and faint,
He blesses my hand to toil;
Faithful is He as He washes my feet
From the trace of each earthly soil.*

FAITH AND GRATITUDE

"Many lepers were in Israel in the time of Eliseus the prophet, and none of them was cleansed, saving Naaman the Syrian." Luke 4:27

The Bible recounts the story of a certain Syrian who had an incurable illness. We all feel sympathy toward close friends who are going through some kind of physical disability and especially so towards any who fall victims to incurable illnesses. In these days, the media inform us about new, incurable, previously unknown illnesses and diseases all too often. One such disease, which is mentioned in both the Old and New Testaments, is leprosy. The Old Testament set out the ways of treating lepers and leprosy in Israel, while in the New Testament we read about people suffering from this disease and how they sought a cure from our Lord Jesus.

Our story, however, relates to an Old Testament case of this disease, and it is recorded in 2 Kings 5:1-18. During the reign of the Assyrian king, Shalmaneser II, in about the 8th Century B.C., Israel and Syria had agreed to permit a mutual exchange between their countries, but Israel's allies had certain reservations about its Syrian neighbours. This was due to frequent raids by small groups of Syrian bandits, so it was only natural that Jehoram, the reigning king in Israel, also did not fully trust his neighbours.

We are told that Naaman, the captain of the host of the king of Syria, was a great man, honourable, highly respected, a mighty man of valour, but he had fallen victim to the dreadful disease of leprosy. This was an incurable skin disease and in that respect as dreadful a sickness as cancer. The organs of the body are attacked by leprosy and disintegrate, the illness progresses and affects further parts of the body as well. In the early stages there is no pain but the final stages are extremely painful. The historian Josephus writes that "lepers were officially treated as diseased and considered as dead."

In the case of Naaman the leper, we are not told how far his leprosy had progressed, but we are told that he continued to fulfil a very important and responsible role for the Syrian army. So we can only deduce that his leprosy was in the comparatively early stages of development, though the signs and symptoms of it were evident to all the people around him. In time, a little Israelite maiden noticed it. She was a humble housemaid to Naaman's wife, but she was so full of sympathy for her master that she suggested a way in which he might seek a cure for his illness. Her kind nature could not look indifferently at the sufferings of another human being. She was a God-fearing Israelite girl and believed in the power of God's prophet Elisha to heal her master, Naaman, whom she respected and considered worthy of being healed.

Naaman was a man of high military standing in the Syrian army, yet he accepted the maiden's modest suggestion, the suggestion of a humble servant who was often in the presence of her lord. Naaman's reaction was positive. When God offers His divine help, He uses godly people who have the character of a quiet, humble and modest disposition, and this can be a lesson for us. How often do we accept the good suggestions and opinions of our brothers and sisters in Christ? Do we consider their advice willingly, or with joy? Or do we go on our

guard with a reflex action of rejection, even with a certain amount of anger, a negative reaction? Our brethren in Christ, our family, and those with whom we have daily interaction well know our characters and often only too well what advice we have need of. Do we always listen to and appreciate their suggestions?

When we, on our part, are giving advice and suggestions to others, do we always do so in a godly spirit, with quietness and humbleness? The offering of advice has to be always in the proper spirit, in the proper way, also at the appropriate time, at the right place and to the right person. It is always a delicate undertaking and difficult to carry through satisfactorily, but by the careful study of God's word and in a spirit of love and humility, we can come to the right way of giving others advice and reminders. *"A man hath joy in the answer of his mouth; and a word in season, how good is it!" Prov.15:23.*

Returning to the story of Naaman's leprosy, we find that the intervention of the king of Syria did not bring about the expected results. The king of Israel did not agree to receive the Syrian general, suspecting that in Naaman's case there was some kind of political provocation or even some trap that would possibly lead to war. At that time, the prophet in Israel was the renowned prophet Elisha, and when he learnt of Naaman's case, he offered his help. However, we are told that, when Naaman the leper stood in Elisha's doorway, the prophet did not receive him personally but instead greeted him through a messenger, who gave directions that would rid Naaman of his leprosy. Naaman was not impressed with the welcome he received in Israel, when neither the king nor even the prophet personally received him. He had expectations of a grand welcome with a feast and full honours, a royal performance! Yet here he was met with what sounded to him to be ridiculous advice of very doubtful value.

After these surprising events, Naaman became very angry and, turning away in a rage, prepared his belongings as well as his escort for the return journey to Syria. His servants desperately tried to persuade him to reconsider his rash decision - evidently the Syrian general was sympathetic towards his servants and received respect from them, for they all wished that he be cured of his disease. He must have been approachable and good towards his servants, as they were not afraid to question his decision and were eventually able to change his mind. It is rather remarkable, indeed, that a man of such high standing, having a responsible position and authority, could still humbly yield to the suggestions and advice of his servants.

In accordance with Elisha's advice, Naaman therefore went and dipped himself in the river Jordan. After the first dip, there was no change; when he dipped a second time, again there was no change. The third and fourth dips likewise brought no improvement. After the fifth and sixth dips, there was still no improvement. But after he had dipped himself the seventh time in Jordan, the body of Naaman the leper was cleansed! It was faith that had led to his being healed; after the seventh dipping of his body in Jordan, Naaman was the recipient of a great blessing, the blessing of being restored to health! Seven in the Bible symbolises or represents perfection, and we can find for ourselves a valuable lesson from this story of Naaman.

If we desire the promises and blessings of God, our faith in them must always be perfect and complete as well. Our obedience to God, our baptism into death with Jesus Christ, must also be wholehearted, they must be perfect and complete.

The example of Naaman's faith was mentioned by Jesus in His sermon to the dwellers in Nazareth, and we read in Luke 4:27 - *"and there were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet; and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian."* The dwellers in Nazareth, from where our Saviour came, did not receive Jesus properly. They knew Him from His birth as the son of Joseph and Mary; they had observed Him growing up in the power of God; and they had also heard that He performed many miracles in neighbouring Capernaum. But when our Lord Jesus came to where He had previously lived, they rejected Him, even planning to destroy Him.

Maybe this event should lead us to examine our own behaviour. Have we become indifferent to our consecration, in that it now lacks excitement and has become commonplace? Perhaps our elder or maturer brethren no longer enjoy the appreciation they previously received from us? Are their voices the same as they were, or has even the tone now become rather monotonous to us? We have many talks on tape on many topics, are we tempted to stay at home and listen to one of these rather than take the effort to prepare ourselves and to join in the mutual fellowship of the Lord's people. *"Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is, but exhorting one another, and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching."* (Heb 10:25)

Many of us have been "in the truth" for 10 or more years, others 20, 30, 40 or 50 years. Maybe we are proud of our achievement, born and raised in a Christian home, next to the Bible. But maybe we have become used to and complacent about our fellowship meetings. Maybe we are coming just to satisfy or please others, to fulfil the requests of our parents, or maybe even God? whom we cannot possibly deceive for He knows our heart's condition only too well. Dear brethren, let us treasure the precious truth which we have been so privileged to receive. Let us refresh ourselves every day with the Divine promises for it is only so that we can become partakers of the divine nature. Let us respect our elder, wiser brethren, and how much of their lives they have sacrificed in order to provide us with necessary spiritual food.

In Israel there were many lepers, and these were classified as unclean. 2 Kings 7:3 mentions four leprous men at the entrance of the gate of the city; but the prophet did not heal these, as they did not possess faith. From Luke's gospel, we learn of another ten lepers, who came to Jesus requesting that their leprosy be cured. (Luke 12:17-19) With a miracle, Jesus cured them all, but only one came back to Jesus to offer his thanks for being given back his health. Amazingly, he was not a Hebrew but a Samaritan, yet he was so full of gratitude to our Lord. His behaviour reminds us of that of Naaman the leper, for he did not depart immediately to his home after being cured but, instead, returned to the prophet Elisha and offered a gift of high value.

"And he(Naaman) returned to the man of God (Elisha); he and all his company, and came and stood before him, and he said, Behold, now I know that there is no God in all the earth, but in Israel: now therefore, I pray thee, take a blessing of thy servant. But he said, As the Lord liveth, before whom I stand, I

will receive none. And he urged him to take it, but he refused." 2 Kings 5:15,16. Naaman's actions could be a wonderful example for us to follow, both in respect of his gratitude towards Elisha as well as his adoration of the God of Israel. Let us reflect for a moment, how much we should be grateful to our Heavenly Father, who has healed us from the "leprosy" of sin and forgiven us all our transgressions. For through faith in the precious blood of our Lord Jesus, we have received forgiveness for all our transgressions, we have been washed clean from the "leprosy" of our sins. The apostle Paul reminds us of the gratitude we owe to God and of our fitting response to His divine goodness in Romans 12:1 - *"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service."*

After analysing the story of Naaman the leper as regards Naaman and his character, let us now turn our attention to Elisha. His was a noble character, it did not permit him to accept any reward from the rich general, who was fully prepared to reward him well. Acceptance of Naaman's offer would represent Elisha as selling God's power, symbolically speaking, it would indicate that God's power was a marketable commodity. The prophet Elisha knew well that the gifts of God are not for sale and this aspect of his character should be a trait of our characters also, as we impart to others spiritual services. *"Freely you have received, freely give!"* Matt. 10:8.

In 2 Kings 5:20-27, in contrast, we learn what happened after Naaman had been cured. Elisha's servant Gehazi had a different heart and mind from that of Elisha; earthly things and material benefits occupied an important place in his heart and for material gain he twice allowed himself to lie. We recall what happened - the leprosy of Naaman came upon Elisha's servant as a result of his sin. Gehazi had been exposed to Elisha's work every day yet in all the time he had not learnt anything, he did not appreciate the prophet's gift, the gift of the power of God. In 2 Cor. 6:1, Paul warns us with the words - *"And working together with Him, we entreat also that you receive not the grace of God in vain."*

Finally, let us recall the noble and full of gratitude behaviour of the cured Syrian general. After being cleansed of his leprosy, Naaman made a request that he be allowed to take away a little of the soil of Israel. This soil he planned to keep somewhere close to him, so that on it, on holy ground, he could bend his knees before the true God who had restored his life. It seems certain that, to the end of his life, this man was constantly filled with gratitude to God for the grace he had received. *"Praise ye the Lord O give thanks, unto the Lord, for He is good; for hIs mercy endureth for ever."* Psa 107:1.

"Heal me, O Jehovah, and I shall be healed; save me, and I shall be saved; for Thou art my praise." Jer. 17:14. (TZ:96)

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