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WAITING WITH PATIENCE

And so it is that the year A.D. 2011 has arrived, with seemingly little change from the beginning of A.D. 2010: the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq continue; the tension between the Palestinians and Israel (particularly over the Gaza strip and the West Bank) remains; many Western countries continue to struggle to recover from the Global Financial Crisis; “natural disasters” such as cyclones, tsunamis and earthquakes continue to occur; the people of the Western countries continue to indulge themselves in pleasures such as travel and unnecessary material goods while millions in the undeveloped countries starve; children are born and people continue to die in all parts of the world; the religions of the world continue to be powerless to change the situation and the Islamic faith continues to expand. When viewed from a human standpoint one may logically conclude that there is little purpose to it all, and so the beginning of a new year is an appropriate time to ponder the current world situation, the developments which might occur during 2011 and Man’s eternal destiny.

The current situation

A broad scale assessment of the events of the world is not new—many centuries ago Solomon observed the seemingly purposeless repetition of the natural phenomena of his world: *“The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity. What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun? One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh... The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to his place where he arose. The wind goeth toward the south, and turneth about unto the north; it whirleth about continually, and the wind returneth again according to his circuits. All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full; unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again. All things are full of labour; man cannot utter it: the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing”*

under the sun. Is there any thing whereof it may be said, See, this is new? it hath been already of old time, which was before us. There is no remembrance of former things; neither shall there be any remembrance of things that are to come with those that shall come after. I the Preacher was king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I gave my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven: this sore travail hath God given to the sons of man to be exercised therewith. I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit” (Ecclesiastes 1:1-14).

Solomon used the word “vanity” to describe the seemingly purposeless events of his day—the succession of generations, one following another; the sun rising in the east, moving across the sky until it disappeared in the west, only to return to the east the next morning; the rivers continuing to flow into the sea but the sea was not filled, and so on.

Solomon stated that there was nothing new under the sun. That statement might be challenged today because there have been several inventions in recent times which did not exist in previous generations. Many of the recent inventions are based on

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electronics and computers: the internet, “mobile” (“cell”) phones, satellite navigation systems, robots and automation of industrial processes. Other fields where there have been significant technological changes include agriculture (fertilizers, genetically modified plants, insecticides and fungicides), medicine (bionic ears, “key hole” surgery, organ transplants, artificial limbs, anaesthetics), space probes and advances in intercontinental travel.

However while these devices are new to Man, the bases from which they have been developed have existed since creation, as Solomon declared: “*it hath been already of old time, which was before us*”—their development at this time is due to God revealing to mankind the knowledge of His creation which in turn has enabled mankind to develop them. Such revelation is in stark contrast to the time when Daniel received visions from God: “*But thou, O Daniel, shut up the words, and seal the book, even to the time of the end: many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased*” (Daniel 12:4). The direction to Daniel to “*shut up the words and seal the book*” implies that the means by which the present day developments are derived were present in Daniel’s day, but it was not God’s time to reveal them to mankind—to enable Man to “invent” the modern day phenomena. The difference between Daniel’s time and 2011 A.D. is that God has now opened “*the book*” and given mankind some insight into more of the mysteries and secrets of His creation.

Vanity

Solomon called the activities of his day “vanity”. Strong’s Concordance defines “vanity” as “emptiness, transitory and unsatisfactory” (#1892), which is an apt description of the repetitive nature of events on the earth, including all the events which have transpired between creation and 2011 A.D. For some individuals, life has seemed so lacking in purpose that they have concluded there is no purpose in living, and rather than continue the struggle to survive, they have voluntarily ended their lives.

In order to find some purpose in life it is necessary to consider the rest of Solomon’s conclusion—that God has given this “*sore travail to the sons of man to be exercised therewith*”.

Strong’s Concordance states that the Hebrew word translated “*exercised*” (#6031) has wide application and includes the concepts of “looking down or browbeating; depressing”, in either a literal or figurative sense. In the King James Version the same word is translated by several different English words, including “afflict” (Genesis 15:13; 31:50; Exodus

1:11-12; 1 Kings 11:39) and “humble” (Exodus 10:3; Deuteronomy 8:2, 3, 16; 26:6). The concepts of “afflict” and “humble” are closely related—affliction often leads to humility. Thus Solomon concluded that God’s purpose in subjecting mankind to the presently seemingly vain experience is to afflict them so that they are humbled.

However, unless God has planned some period of prosperity and longevity to follow the present time of vanity, it is inconsistent to consider God as a God of love. If there is no enduring benefit it would be totally improper for a “God of love” to inflict such agony on His creation, particularly in view of the fact that many are “good people”.

Consequently, in order to understand God’s purpose in subjecting mankind to the present “*sore travail*”, it is necessary to know something of His plan for mankind’s eternal destiny.

Man’s eternal destiny

God’s plan for mankind centres around His plan to establish His kingdom on earth, as Jesus taught His disciples to pray: “*After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven*” (Matt. 6:9-10). The significance of that prayer must be fully appreciated—God’s will is to be done **in earth** as it is done in heaven.

A common understanding of “heaven” is that it is a paradise of righteousness—and rightly so because God’s throne is in heaven: “*The LORD is in his holy temple, the LORD’S throne is in heaven...*” (Psalm 11:4). Thus the Psalmist also wrote: “*Truth shall spring out of the earth; and righteousness shall look down from heaven*” (Psalm 85:11).

Consequently when God’s will is done in earth as it is done in heaven, righteousness and peace will exist on the earth, as the Psalmist declared: “*The LORD reigneth; let the earth rejoice; let the multitude of isles be glad thereof... The heavens declare his righteousness, and all the people see his glory. Confounded be all they that serve graven images, that boast themselves of idols: worship him, all ye gods. Zion heard, and was glad; and the daughters of Judah rejoiced because of thy judgments, O LORD. For thou, LORD, art high above all the earth: thou art exalted far above all gods*” (Psalm 97:1-9).

The Apostle Peter confirmed that God’s righteous kingdom will be established on earth: “*Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness*” (2 Peter 3:13).

Promises of the kingdom

Peter stated that God has promised a new earth “wherein dwelleth righteousness”. Many of the verses which give the details of the kingdom are contained in the Old Testament, with only general references being made in the New Testament. One example of a New Testament reference is 1 Corinthians 15:24-26: “*Then cometh the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have put down all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death*”. The Apostle Paul refers to the kingdom without giving any details, other than to imply that it will “*put down all rule and all authority and power*”. The Apostle assumed that the Christians at Corinth were familiar with the details recorded in the Old Testament and there was no need for him to repeat them.

Jesus implied that His disciples would know when the establishment of the kingdom was nigh: “*And when these things begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh*” (Luke 21:28).

The kingdom hope of Israel

The hope of the kingdom being restored to Israel was in the forefront of Jesus’ disciples minds, particularly at the time of His return to heaven after His resurrection: “*To whom also he shewed himself alive after his passion by many infallible proofs, being seen of them forty days, and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God: And, being assembled together with them, commanded them that they should not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for the promise of the Father, which, saith he, ye have heard of me. For John truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence. When they therefore were come together, they asked of him, saying, Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel? And he said unto them, It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power. But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth. And when he had spoken these things, while they beheld, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight*” (Acts 1:3-9).

The above verses in Acts 1 contain four significant statements:

- after His resurrection Jesus spoke about the kingdom of God. His preaching gives added assurance that the concept of a righteous kingdom

being established on earth was not a whim which was forgotten when He was crucified;

- Jesus did not deny that the kingdom would be restored to Israel;
- that it was not for Jesus’ disciples to know the time when the kingdom would be restored (which time the Father had put in his own power); and
- the disciples would receive the Holy Spirit and be witnesses for an undefined period.

When?

His disciples’ request to know when the kingdom would be established was reasonable—the hope of the kingdom was of long standing, being the principal element of Jesus’ preaching from the very beginning of His ministry: “*From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*” (Matthew 4:17).

Some have suggested that while it was not for His disciples to know the time, that was because they had not yet received the Holy Spirit, and that subsequently the spirit would reveal the time to them and to all believers. Such an understanding has led many to predict precise dates for the establishment of the kingdom, some dates being 1874, 1881, 1914, 1917, 1919, 1929, 1948, 1967, 1984, 2032, and 2044.

The passing of several of those dates without the proponents’ hopes being realised has caused many to lose faith that the kingdom will ever be established. However the Christian should not be discouraged by the fact that some of those dates have passed and yet wars, sickness and death continue. In fact such a loss of faith in the hope of the kingdom was foretold by both Jesus and the Apostle Peter: “*I tell you... when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?*” (Luke 18:8), and, “*Knowing this first, that there shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts, And saying, Where is the promise of his coming? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation*” (2 Peter 3:3-4). Hence, in spite of the fact that Jesus’ coming to earth was more than 2000 years ago, such scoffing should not cause the Christian to abandon their hope of God’s righteous kingdom being established on earth.

Though it tarry

On the contrary the Christian can be doubly confident that the kingdom would be established, in spite of the seeming delay, because the prophet Habakkuk foretold that there would be a seeming delay: “*And the LORD answered me, and said, Write the vision, and make it plain upon tables, that he may run that readeth it. For the vision is yet for an appointed time, but at the end it shall speak, and not lie: though*

it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry” (Habakkuk 2:2-3).

The two words “tarry” in verse 3 have different Hebrew origins:

- the first occurrence is a derivative from the Hebrew **mâhahh** (#4102) which Dr Strong defines as “to question or hesitate, that is, (by implication) to be reluctant”. It is variously translated as “delay”, “linger”, “stay selves”, and “tarry”;
- The second occurrence of “tarry” is from the Hebrew **'âchar** (#309) which Dr Strong defines as “a primitive root; to loiter (that is, be behind); by implication to procrastinate”; variously translated as “continue”, “defer”, “delay”, “hinder”, “be late (slack)”, “stay (there)”, and “tarry (longer)”.

Thus the prophet Habakkuk is saying that the vision is for an appointed time (a fixed time in God’s plan) and, though it seems to tarry or hesitate, it will not loiter or languish—that is, it will not delay beyond God’s “*appointed time*”. The kingdom will be established precisely when God has planned it, even though it might seem to be tarrying or loitering—it is now 136 years since 1874, 96 years since 1914 and the outbreak of World War 1, and 62 years since 1948 when the nation of present day Israel was established.

Waiting with patience

The current situation is concisely summed up by the Apostle Paul: “*For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope, Because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. And not only they, but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body. For we are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for? But if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it*

In summary the points the Apostle makes are:

- God deliberately subjected the creature (creation) to the present “vanity”, not willingly (that is, not because He takes delight in their suffering) but nevertheless He has a reason for doing so;
- It was subjected in hope, that is, the benefits of the subjection were not immediately apparent, and indeed are still “unseen” by the majority of mankind;
- The creation will be delivered from the “bondage

of corruption” in which they “groan”;

- The test for the Christian is to continue to trust in the promises of God while they wait patiently for their deliverance (“waiting” implies the observer believes everything is ready but the event has not yet occurred).

The promise is assured

In the texts quoted above both the prophet Habakkuk and the Apostle Paul imply that Christians would be conscious of a waiting period. Christians today, in A.D. 2011, may be assured that their hope is not fanciful but assured: “*And we desire that every one of you do shew the same diligence to the full assurance of hope unto the end...which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and stedfast...*” (Heb. 6:11, 19), in “*full assurance of faith*” (Heb. 10:22).

And so as Christians today wait for the establishment of the kingdom they must not waver—not be “*tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men...*” (Eph 4:14)—but fully realise that they have “*a more sure word of prophecy...a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts*” (2 Peter 1:19).■

HOPE IN ISRAEL TODAY

On December 1, 2010, *Arutz Sheva*, an arm of Israel National News, reported that a recent survey of 2327 Israelis showed that 29.5% believe the temple will be rebuilt in 2011; 43.8% believe it will be rebuilt during the next decade and 26.5% believe it will be rebuilt within the next 20 years (<http://www.Israelnationalnews.com/more/Poll/aspx/124#>).

And so, even after millennia of desolation, only 2 in every 1000 Israelis do not believe the temple will be rebuilt.

However on the other hand, on December 6, 2010, *The Associated Press* reported that Argentina has announced it recognizes a Palestinian state, calling Palestine “a free and independent state within its 1967 borders”—Israeli foreign ministry spokesman Yigal Palmor told AFP: “This regrettable decision will not help at all to change the situation between Israel and the Palestinians”.

Argentina’s announcement came only a few days after Brazil “recognized Palestine” and expressed the hope that Israel and Palestine “will co-exist peacefully and in security”. Bolivia, Ecuador and Uruguay also have announced they will recognize a Palestinian Authority (PA) state next year, according to *Agence France Presse*.■

GOD AND THREE KINGS

“Blessed be the name of God for ever and ever: for wisdom and might are his... he removeth kings, and setteth up kings...” (Daniel 2:20-21).

Midst the turmoil of the present world scene the question may justifiably be asked whether there is a God and, if so, what is He doing to bring about the kingdom of righteousness promised so many times in the Bible?—it is 2000 years since Jesus (declared to be the Saviour of the world—John 4:42) came to earth the first time: for how much longer will mankind have to wait?

The “seemingly obvious” alternative answers to the question are that there is no God, or if there is a God, that the world is currently out of (beyond) His control, that is, the nations are a law unto themselves and are doing as they please.

Consequently it is profitable for Christians to remind themselves that Jehovah God is pre-eminent, that is, He is above all—He is the One who has been “*from everlasting*” and will be “*to everlasting*” (Psa. 90:2); He is the all powerful One, the Lord God Omnipotent (Rev. 19:6). As the prophet Isaiah wrote: “*‘To whom then will ye liken me, or shall I be equal?’ saith the Holy One*” (Isa. 40:25).

There are several events recorded in the Old Testament which show that, in accordance with Daniel 2:20-21 (quoted above), God has directly set up kings and removed kings. In other words, God has directly controlled their actions and the outcome of their exploits, **even though the exercise of His power was not apparent to them**. In every instance, God was effecting a purpose which was beyond their comprehension. The possibility remains that He is doing the same thing today.

Three kings whom God directly controlled were Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar and Cyrus.

Pharaoh

Moses was commissioned by God to approach Pharaoh and ask him to release the Israelites from their bondage in Egypt. Since Moses was carrying out God’s command the natural mind would expect Pharaoh to agree to the Israelites’ release. However God had a greater purpose, and He told Moses **in advance** what He was going to do: “*And the LORD said unto Moses, ‘When thou goest to return into Egypt, see that thou do all those wonders before Pharaoh, which I have put in thine hand: but I will harden his heart, that he shall not let the people go’*” (Exod. 4:21). Pharaoh reacted exactly as God had told Moses: “*And afterward Moses and Aaron*

went in, and told Pharaoh, ‘Thus saith the LORD God of Israel, Let my people go...’ . And Pharaoh said, ‘Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice to let Israel go? I know not the LORD, neither will I let Israel go’” (Exod. 5:1-2).

There were subsequent occasions also during the days before Israel’s exodus from Egypt when God hardened Pharaoh’s heart: “*... And he hardened Pharaoh’s heart, that he hearkened not unto them; as the LORD had said*” (Exod. 7:10-13).

Since the nation of Israel was God’s chosen people (Deut. 7:6), it might be surprising that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart so that he did not release the Israelites. However Exodus 9:12-16 records God’s purpose for hardening Pharaoh’s heart: “*And the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh, and he hearkened not unto them; as the LORD had spoken unto Moses. And the LORD said unto Moses, Rise up early in the morning, and stand before Pharaoh, and say unto him, Thus saith the LORD God of the Hebrews, Let my people go, that they may serve me. For I will at this time send all my plagues upon thine heart, and upon thy servants, and upon thy people; that thou mayest know that there is none like me in all the earth. For now I will stretch out my hand, that I may smite thee and thy people with pestilence; and thou shalt be cut off from the earth. And in very deed for this cause have I raised thee up, for to shew in thee my power; and that my name may be declared throughout all the earth*”.

The Apostle Paul understood the significance of God’s action in hardening Pharaoh’s heart, so much so that he cites it in his letter to the Romans: “*For the scripture saith unto Pharaoh, ‘Even for this same purpose have I raised thee up, that I might shew my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth’. Therefore ... whom he will he hardeneth*” (Romans 9:17-18). Paul explains that God directed Pharaoh’s affairs **for the purpose of showing His power**, and he then used that event to explain God’s mercy and that His selection of individuals is not unrighteous (Romans 9:14).

One argument which might be proposed by the natural mind to deny God’s direct involvement with Pharaoh is that Pharaoh’s “natural disposition” was to be a ruthless despot. However the only verses which suggest that Pharaoh hardened his own heart are Exodus 8:15 and 9:34: “*But when Pharaoh saw that*

there was respite, he hardened his heart, and hearkened not unto them; as the LORD had said”, and “... when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunders were ceased, **he sinned yet more, and hardened his heart, he and his servants**”. It may be contended that those two verses contradict Exodus 4:21, 9:12, 10:1, 10:20, 10:27, 11:10 and 14:8, all of which state that it was the Lord who hardened Pharaoh’s heart. However, when viewed in their context, it is apparent that Exodus 8:15 and 9:34 simply record **the effect** of God’s control over Pharaoh and **not the cause** of Pharaoh’s actions—Pharaoh acted precisely as God directed and so he fulfilled God’s purpose. The Bible is harmonious.

It might be difficult to believe that God, the creator of the universe (Isa. 42:5), would harden Pharaoh’s heart just to show His power. However that is the plain statement of Scripture.

Nebuchadnezzar

Nebuchadnezzar was another king over whom God exercised control. The record is in 2 Kings 24 and 25, 1 Chronicles 6, Ezra 5, Jeremiah 27 and Daniel chapters 1 to 5.

2 Kings 24:1 identifies Nebuchadnezzar as king of Babylon, and verses 7 and 10 outline the boundaries of the land he conquered. Those verses may also be interpreted to mean that Nebuchadnezzar conquered the land, including Jerusalem, by his own power: “*And the king of Egypt came not again any more out of his land: for the king of Babylon had taken, from the brook of Egypt unto the river Euphrates, all that pertained to the king of Egypt...*”. However 1 Chronicles 6:15, Ezra 5:12 and Jeremiah 27:4-6 state that Nebuchadnezzar was merely “*the Lord’s hand*”—it was God who captured the land: “*And Jehozadak went into captivity, when the LORD carried away Judah and Jerusalem by the hand of Nebuchadnezzar*” (1 Chron. 6:15); “*But after that our fathers had provoked the God of heaven unto wrath, he gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon... who destroyed this house, and carried the people away into Babylon*” (Ezra 5:12); and “... *Thus saith the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel... I have made the earth, the man and the beast that are upon the face of the earth, by my great power and by my outstretched arm; and I give it unto whom it seemeth right unto me. And now have I given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, my servant...*” (Jer. 27:4-6).

Seventy years

Just as God “used” Nebuchadnezzar to take Israel captive to Babylon, so He proclaimed before they were captured that their captivity would last 70 years:

“*The word that came to Jeremiah concerning all the people of Judah... which Jeremiah the prophet spake unto all the people of Judah, and to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, saying... ‘Because ye have not heard my words, behold, I will send and take all the families of the north’, saith the LORD, ‘and I will send unto Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, my servant... and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon **seventy years...**’*” (Jer. 25:1-11). Thus is evident God’s direct hand in the affairs of Israel and in the power that the kings of Babylon were allowed to exercise over them.

Cyrus

Ezra 1:1-2 records the events which preceded the Israelites’ return to their land: “*Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying, ‘Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, ‘All the kingdoms of the earth hath the LORD, the God of heaven, given me; and he hath charged me to build him an house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whosoever there is among you of all his people, his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and build the house of the LORD, the God of Israel, (he is God,) which is in Jerusalem’*”. Thus God directly influenced Cyrus—He “stirred” him up—so that Cyrus would accomplish God’s purpose of rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem.

It might seem that God has expended an excessive amount of time dealing with a few individuals to achieve ‘very little’; in other words, in today’s language, His operations have been “inefficient”. However the events illustrate how detailed are God’s dealings with His human creation. God’s dealings were summed up by Nebuchadnezzar after he had been humbled and forced to eat grass for seven years: “*And at the end of the days I Nebuchadnezzar lifted up mine eyes unto heaven, and mine understanding returned unto me, and I blessed the Most High, and I praised and honoured him that liveth for ever; for his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom from generation to generation: And all the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing: and he doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, ‘What doest thou?’... Now I Nebuchadnezzar praise and extol and honour the King of heaven; for all his works are truth, and his ways judgment: and those that walk in pride he is able to abase*” (Dan. 4:34-37). God did not leave anything to chance and Nebuchadnezzar now realised how intimately God had dealt with him.

New Testament times

God's dealings with Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar and Cyrus are examples of Him using His power to direct the actions of men before Jesus came to earth. The question may be asked: is God still active in directing the affairs of mankind or has He ceased doing so?

The Apostle Paul declared that, in his day, God was still directing the affairs of men. He wrote: "*Let every soul be in subjection to the higher powers: for there is no power but of God; and the powers that be are ordained of God. Therefore he that resisteth the power, withholdeth the ordinance of God...*" (Rom. 13:1-2). Paul's statement is emphatic: that the civil ruling powers of his day were in authority because they were "ordained of God". The concept of being "ordained of God" does not mean that God merely "permits" them—Strong's Concordance defines the word translated "ordained" (#5021) as "to arrange in an orderly manner"—a statement of positive action.

God arranged the powers in Paul's day and there is no Scriptural statement by which to conclude that God has abandoned His influence. Indeed the Scriptures are explicit that in the last days God will direct the

affairs of the nations: "*Behold, I will bring them from the north country, and gather them from the coasts of the earth, and with them the blind and the lame, the woman with child and her that travaileth with child together: a great company shall return thither*" (Jer. 31:8). Also the prophet Joel wrote: "*For, behold, in those days, and in that time, when I shall bring again the captivity of Judah and Jerusalem, I will also gather all nations, and will bring them down into the valley of Jehoshaphat, and will plead with them there for my people and for my heritage Israel, whom they have scattered among the nations, and parted my land*" (Joel 3:1-2).

The Christian should not be hasty to dismiss the possibility that, in A.D. 2010, God has been working out a higher purpose than what the worldly governments have realised—the truth recorded in Isaiah 55:8 is not limited to the era before Jesus came to earth nor is it limited to the very last days: "*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD*". It is conceivable that God is directing and will direct the nations of earth in 2011, even though He might not yet "*rise up to the prey*" (Zephaniah 3:8).■

SAINTHOOD

There was much excitement in religious circles in Australia in 2010 A.D. when it became known that the Pope had agreed to declare Mary McKillop a saint. She would be the first Australian to be canonized and many Australians travelled to Rome to attend the service in the forecourt of the Vatican.

Concept of sainthood

The generally accepted concept of a saint is purity of life style, as the Apostle Paul declared: "*But fornication, and all uncleanness, or covetousness, let it not be once named among you, as becometh saints; Neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting, which are not convenient: but rather giving of thanks. For this ye know, that no whoremonger, nor unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God*" (Eph. 5:3-5).

However the saints to whom Paul referred were not associated with the Roman Catholic Church but were those in Ephesus who believed that Jesus was the Only Begotten Son of God, that He had paid the ransom sacrifice to redeem mankind from death, and who were trying to live according to His example.

Not dead but alive

Neither were they dead nor in heaven, but living on the earth, as shown by Paul's statements: "*But now I*

go unto Jerusalem to minister unto the saints" (Rom. 15:25); "*All the saints salute you, chiefly they that are of Caesar's household*" (Phil. 4:22); "*unto the church of God which is at Corinth, with all the saints which are in all Achaia*" (2 Cor. 1:1).

Called to be saints

However there are two verses of Scripture which, as translated in the King James Version, might give the impression that sainthood is a future (spiritual) reward of the faithful:

- Romans 1:7: "To all that be in Rome, beloved of God, called **to be** saints..."; and
- 1 Corinthians 1:2: "Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called **to be** saints...".

Even though they are retained by many more recent translations, the words "*to be*" are not in the original manuscripts—they have been inserted during translation—and give an incorrect understanding. Sainthood is not something for which the Christian has to wait until after death—Christians are saints during this life.

A further issue is that Mary McKillop is attributed with performing two miracles after she died. Scripture declares that dead people are lifeless and cannot perform any task (Acts 2:29).■

A MESSAGE TO SAINTS

The following text comprised a message sent to the brethren at a Convention in Melbourne, Australia, held over the New Year weekend 2005-2006, by a brother who had planned to be in attendance to open the Convention. It is reprinted here with the wish that it will be a blessing for all to meditate upon as we enter the year 2011.

It is indeed a privilege and pleasure to welcome you to another year's Convention of the Melbourne Berean Bible Class. We are wonderfully blessed that we can meet confidently on such occasions, and foremost that a spirit of oneness and brotherly love prevails in our midst. We note the Apostle's words in Galatians 3:28: "*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female; for ye are all one in Christ Jesus*". Surely, this is the motto for all gatherings of the Lord's people—all one in Christ Jesus.

There is always room for greater love and understanding amongst brethren, as the Apostle wrote: "*There is one body and one spirit, even as you are called in one hope of your calling*" (Eph. 4:4).

In opening the 1969 Convention, the speaker remarked: "It is good to see so many smiling faces so obviously rejoicing in the Lord". There have been vast changes in our world since then affecting every aspect of life, including Christian worship in activity. Are we still 'obviously rejoicing in the Lord', as the Brother put it? If not, why not? Our study of God's word, the fellowship of His people and the experience of life under His faithful hand should surely have increased our joy and our confidence. We should certainly expect this in the company of fellow Christians as now, and as we rejoice together in the beauty of the Gospel—the Plan of God for the blessing of all mankind and the rich privilege of the present call of the church.

But does this joy and confidence show to others when we go out into the world? Despite external changes, the message of the Gospel does not change: "*Our Father is the Father of Lights with whom there is no variableness neither shadow of turning*" (James 1:17). "*What He has promised He is able and willing to perform; you have need of patience that after you have done the will of God you might receive the promise. For yet a little while and He will come and will not tarry*" (Hebrews 10:36, 37). We will all need faith and patient endurance in the coming year for we do not know what awaits us, but we do know that the everlasting arms of the Father undergirds each of His people.

Revelation 3:14-23 has, as well as an immediate message, a lesson for believers living at this end of the Gospel Age. First, it points out the final stage in

the development of the church, and it rings ever so true. It describes a church that has largely grown materialistic, far from God's heart and unrepentant. It depicts Christ outside the door seeking entry, largely ignored. It also issues a wonderful promise to those who still do love to hear their Master's voice. "*Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any man or woman or child hear my voice and open the door, I will come into him and will sup with him, and he will be with me. To him that overcometh I will grant to stand with me on my throne, even as I overcame and am set down with my Father in His throne*" (Revelation 3:21, 22). Have you heard his voice? Have you answered and let him into your heart and life? As the two on the way to Emmaus found, there is no more wondrous guest. The promise he gave his disciples nearly two thousand years ago comes down to us just as clearly today, for "*Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the Age*".

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, we are richly blessed people. We have a message to delight both heart and mind, a personal message as well as a message of real faith for all people. We are still able to enjoy sweet fellowship with others of the Lord's people and to share a measure of witness to others. How thankful we should be, and assuredly are, for all our Father's mercies towards us. Above all, we have the promise and realisation of our Saviour's presence with his people and with each one individually. Now we await his special blessing upon our time together here. Let each of us co-operate by seeking in all things to build one another up in the most holy faith.

May this New Year for you and for me, for all of us, be one of closer walking with God, of more attentive listening to his voice, of more trusting in his daily care and oversight of our lives, of even more love for his words of truth; of closer fellowship of those who love and seek to serve the same Master. His service is perfect liberty. May God bless and guide, and keep us all in His love and mercy in the year ahead. Amen.■

"I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:1-3).

THE RIVER EUPHRATES

“On the same day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying: ‘To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates’” (Genesis 15:18 NKJV).

The Bible contains 21 references to the River Euphrates. 19 of them refer to the physical river and two (in Revelation) are symbolic. However none of the passages contains an explicit statement of its symbolic meaning, and so reference to all of its occurrences is necessary to ascertain its symbolic meaning.

Physical characteristics

The River Euphrates is the longest river (approximately 2,780 kilometres) in Western Asia and is one of the two major rivers in Mesopotamia, the other being the Tigris River. It is formed by the union of two branches, the Kara Su (the western Euphrates) and the Murat (the eastern Euphrates), both of which rise in modern eastern Turkey. The Euphrates flows through Syria and Iraq (ancient Babylon), before merging with the Tigris River and emptying into the Persian Gulf.

The Euphrates was a major trade route and the ruins of many ancient cities mentioned in the Bible are located along its course: Babylon (2 Kings 24:7), Kish, Carchemish (2 Chron. 35:20; Jer. 46.2) and Ur of the Chaldees.

Various titles are used to refer to the Euphrates, for example “the River Euphrates” (Deut. 11:24; 2 Sam. 8:3; Jer. 46:2); “the great river, the River Euphrates” (Gen. 15:18; Deut. 1:7; Joshua 1:4); and “the River” (Gen. 2:14; Gen. 31:21—in the latter verse the context from verse 1 implies that the River Euphrates is meant; Gen. 36:37; 1 Kings 4:21).

The Euphrates was one of four rivers which rose as the springs of water in the Garden of Eden (Gen 2:10-14). Descriptions of the courses of the other three rivers are given, but no description is given for the course of the Euphrates, with no explanation why its course is not described.

Physical significance

The Euphrates defined the northern border of the land promised to Abram: *“In the same day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, Unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates”* (Gen. 15:18). Consequently, when the Israelites were preparing to



enter the land after their exodus from Egypt, the River Euphrates was specified as one of the borders of the land from which God would expel the heathen occupiers: *“For if you carefully keep all these commandments which I command you to do—to love the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways, and to hold fast to Him—then the LORD will drive out all these nations from before you, and you will dispossess greater and mightier nations than yourselves. Every place on which the sole of your foot treads shall be yours: from the wilderness and Lebanon, from the river, the River Euphrates, even to the Western Sea, shall be your territory”* (Deut. 11:22-24 NKJV).

The significance of the River Euphrates as one border of the promised land is further reinforced by it being mentioned as one of the boundaries of the land which King Solomon inherited: *“Judah and Israel were as numerous as the sand by the sea in multitude, eating and drinking and rejoicing. So Solomon reigned over all kingdoms from the River to the land of the Philistines, as far as the border of Egypt...”* (1 Kings 4:20-21 NKJV).

Symbolic significance

As well as defining the physical border between the promised land and the lands of other nations, “Euphrates” is mentioned twice in the book of Revelation, which implies that it also has some symbolic meaning. Many scholars have researched several aspects of “the Euphrates” in an endeavour to ascertain its symbolic meaning.

Some insight into its symbolic meaning may be derived from the instances where it is mentioned in the Old Testament.

Hints from the Old Testament

As well as defining one of the physical borders of the promised land, the Israelites were told that the Euphrates defined the border between the nations who served the True God and those who “served other gods”: *“And Joshua said unto all the people, Thus saith the LORD God of Israel, Your fathers dwelt on the other side of the flood in old time, even Terah, the father of Abraham, and the father of Nachor: and they served other gods. And I took your*

father Abraham from the other side of **the flood**, and led him throughout all the land of Canaan, and multiplied his seed, and gave him Isaac... And I have given you a land for which ye did not labour, and cities which ye built not, and ye dwell in them; of the vineyards and oliveyards which ye planted not do ye eat. Now therefore fear the **LORD**, and serve him in sincerity and in truth: and **put away the gods** which your fathers served on the other side of **the flood**, and in Egypt; and **serve ye the LORD**. And if it seem evil unto you to serve the **LORD**, choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of **the flood**, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve the **LORD**. And the people answered and said, God forbid that we should forsake the **LORD**, to serve other gods;...And the people said unto Joshua, Nay; but we will serve the **LORD**. And Joshua said unto the people, Ye are witnesses against yourselves that ye have chosen you the **LORD**, to serve him. And they said, We are witnesses. Now therefore put away, said he, the strange gods which are among you, and incline your heart unto the **LORD** God of Israel. And the people said unto Joshua, The **LORD** our God will we serve, and his voice will we obey. So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and set them a statute and an ordinance in Shechem" (Joshua 24:2-25).

The reference to "**the flood**" in verses 2, 3 and 14 are not to the flood of Noah's day but are an alternative name given to the River Euphrates. Strong's Concordance defines the Hebrew translated "flood" (#5104) in those verses as "a stream (including the sea; especially the Nile, Euphrates, etc.); figuratively, *prosperity*". The word is translated "flood" 18 times, "river" 97 times and "stream" twice. In each instance where it is translated "flood" the context implies that a river is meant.

Strong's definition includes a figurative meaning and thus admits that the Euphrates may have a symbolic meaning, and it is suggested that one symbolic meaning is that it represented a dividing line between the nations who were serving the true God and those who were serving other gods—whose worship was not permitted on this side of "the river".

Jeremiah's girdle

Another symbolic meaning of Euphrates may be derived from God's action regarding Jeremiah's girdle: "*Thus saith the LORD unto me, Go and get thee a linen girdle, and put it upon thy loins, and put it not in water. So I got a girdle according to the*

*word of the LORD, and put it on my loins. And the word of the LORD came unto me the second time, saying, Take the girdle that thou hast got, which is upon thy loins, and arise, go to Euphrates, and hide it there in a hole of the rock. So I went, and hid it by Euphrates, as the **LORD** commanded me. And it came to pass after many days, that the **LORD** said unto me, Arise, go to Euphrates, and take the girdle from thence, which I commanded thee to hide there. Then I went to Euphrates, and digged, and took the girdle from the place where I had hid it: and, behold, the girdle was marred, it was profitable for nothing. Then the word of the **LORD** came unto me, saying, Thus saith the **LORD**, After this manner will I mar the pride of Judah, and the great pride of Jerusalem. This evil people, which refuse to hear my words, which walk in the imagination of their heart, and **walk after other gods, to serve them, and to worship them, shall even be as this girdle**, which is good for nothing. For as the girdle cleaveth to the loins of a man, so have I caused to cleave unto me the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah, saith the **LORD**; that they might be unto me for a people, and for a name, and for a praise, and for a glory: but they would not hear" (Jer. 13:1-11).*

There are some similarities with God's actions regarding Jeremiah's girdle and the demarcation made by the Euphrates as the boundary between the heathen nations and the "god-worshipping" occupants of the promised land. Those on the "other side" worshipped "other gods" which the Israelites were forbidden to do. Likewise with Jeremiah's girdle, He marred the girdle to illustrate to Jeremiah that he would mar the people of Judah and Jerusalem who "**walked after other gods, to serve them, and to worship them, (they) shall even be as this girdle**". In both instances the river Euphrates was a common element, which may be broadly interpreted to show that the Euphrates was a dividing feature.

The day of God's vengeance

Jeremiah 46 gives another example which possibly gives some clue regarding the symbolic use of the river Euphrates. The Euphrates is to be the scene of the battle when God avenges Himself against the Gentiles: "*The word of the **LORD** which came to Jeremiah the prophet against the Gentiles; Against Egypt, against the army of Pharaohnecho king of Egypt, which was **by the river Euphrates** in Carchemish, which Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylon smote in the fourth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah king of Judah. Order ye the buckler and shield, and draw near to battle. Harness the horses; and get up, ye horsemen, and stand forth with your helmets; furbish the spears, and put on the brigandines... Let not the swift flee away, nor the*

mighty man escape; they shall stumble, and fall toward the north **by the river Euphrates**. Who is this that cometh up as a flood, whose waters are moved as the rivers? Egypt riseth up like a flood, and his waters are moved like the rivers; and he saith, I will go up, and will cover the earth; I will destroy the city and the inhabitants thereof. Come up, ye horses; and rage, ye chariots; and let the mighty men come forth; the Ethiopians and the Libyans, that handle the shield; and the Lydians, that handle and bend the bow. For this is the day of the Lord GOD of hosts, a day of vengeance, that he may avenge him of his adversaries: and the sword shall devour, and it shall be satiate and made drunk with their blood: for the Lord GOD of hosts hath a sacrifice in the north country by the river Euphrates" (Jer. 46:1-10).

Just as the Euphrates was the border between God's chosen nation and the nations who served other gods, and the venue for the decay of Jeremiah's girdle, it is possible that it is also the site where God has a sacrifice of all those who rise against Him; represented in the above scene by Egypt, Ethiopia and Libya. In this scenario, the region of the Euphrates presents an alternative to the valley of Jehoshaphat (Joel 3:12).

The book cast into Euphrates

Yet another event recorded in the Old Testament which may give some symbolic meaning to the river Euphrates is that it was to be the destiny of the book in which Jeremiah recorded Babylon's evil: "The word which Jeremiah the prophet commanded Seraiah the son of Neriah, the son of Maaseiah, when he went with Zedekiah the king of Judah into Babylon in the fourth year of his reign. And this Seraiah was a quiet prince. So Jeremiah wrote in a book **all the evil that should come upon Babylon**, even all these words that are written against Babylon. And Jeremiah said to Seraiah, When thou comest to Babylon, and shalt see, and shalt read all these words; Then shalt thou say, O LORD, thou hast spoken against this place, to cut it off, that none shall remain in it, neither man nor beast, but that it shall be desolate for ever. And it shall be, when thou hast made an end of reading this book, that thou shalt bind a stone to it, and **cast it into the midst of Euphrates**: And thou shalt say, **Thus shall Babylon sink, and shall not rise from the evil that I will bring upon her: and they shall be weary. Thus far are the words of Jeremiah**" (Jer. 51:59-64).

Seraiah was to cast the book which recorded all the evil that Babylon had done, bound to a stone, into the Euphrates; the book would sink into the waters of the Euphrates. The Euphrates may be interpreted to symbolise the destiny of the evil of Babylon—again

the Euphrates is associated with the destruction or demise of evil, and thus all three incidents Euphrates distinguishes righteousness and God worship from unrighteousness and the worship of idols—it was the dividing line between God's chosen land and the Gentile nations; the scene of the final destruction of evil by God's hand (as recorded in Jer. 46), and the destiny of the evil of Babylon (Jer. 51).

Historical significance

Another approach in an endeavour to ascertain the correct symbolism to be applied to the Euphrates is to consider its historical significance.

Due to its commercial prominence in times past, such observations may lead to the interpretation that the Euphrates symbolises the nations and the commerce between them—in that context it is important to note that the city of Babylon, the very capital of the Babylonian empire, was situated on the Euphrates.

Euphrates in Revelation

The first occurrence of Euphrates in the book of Revelation is in chapter 9: "saying to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates" (Rev. 9:14 NKJV). Strong's Concordance simply defines the word "Euphrates" in Revelation 9:14 as "Euphrates, a river in Asia".

The second occurrence in the book of Revelation is in chapter 16: "Then the sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up, so that the way of the kings from the east might be prepared" (Rev. 16:12 NKJV).

Any understanding of these two verses requires a symbolic meaning to be attached to the river Euphrates.

Regarding Revelation 16:12, the significance of the drying up of the Euphrates and the consequent preparation of the kings of the east might relate to the fact that ancient Babylon straddled the river Euphrates, a wall surrounded the city and the river Euphrates ran through the middle, entering and exiting through two spiked gates. When the Euphrates was dry, armies could access the centre of the city by passing under the gates, and history records that Babylon was destroyed in Daniel's time by the drying up of the Euphrates which allowed Darius to take the city.

Whatever might have been its significance in times past, the river Euphrates might yet hold some secrets regarding God's hand in the affairs of the nations and the establishment of His kingdom.■

LOVE NEVER FAILS

The last characteristic of love listed by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 13 is “*Love never fails*” (verse 8).

There are at least two aspects of the unfailing nature of love: one relates to love standing alone, and the other relates to the context of verse 8.

Love standing alone

Perfect love would always fulfil the attributes listed in the preceding verses in 1 Corinthians 13—it would never complain about any injustice meted out to it by another, it would never be provoked, it would never envy, and so on. Any failure to act contrary to those attributes means that one’s love is less than perfect.

In keeping with the concept of never failing to act aright, the definition of “fail” in Strong’s Concordance includes not being “driven out of its course”. That means love does not swerve right or left but remains “on course” at all times, in every circumstance, always acting in accord with the qualities listed in 1 Corinthians 13.

Such consistency can only be achieved if there is no relaxation from the exercise of love—love cannot “take a holiday”; there can never be an excuse for not acting completely in accord with the qualities listed.

Such consistency requires diligence—a continuous vigilance to ensure one never reacts in a way which is contrary to the qualities of love. The Apostle Peter wrote: “*Wherefore, beloved, seeing that ye look for such things, be diligent that ye may be found of him in peace, without spot, and blameless...*” (2 Peter 3:14); diligence (continuous vigilance) is required.

One situation in particular which requires diligence is when one receives criticism. Peter summarised Jesus’ reaction in such circumstances: “*Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously*” (1 Peter 2:23). It was Jesus’ compassion (Matt. 9:36) that enabled Him to view His accusers with love and pity: “*Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do...*” (Luke 23:34). It is incumbent on all Christians to develop the same level of love.

Love in context

Another aspect of “love never failing” is implied by the context of verse 8: “*whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away*”.

The sense in which prophecy will fail is not that God’s promises will not be fulfilled. On the contrary, the word of God is sure: “*We have also a more sure word of prophecy...*” (2 Peter 1:19-20). For example, the prophecy that Jesus would come to earth (Isa. 7:14) was given centuries before Paul wrote to the Corinthians. When Paul wrote to the Corinthians the prophecy had not failed but had been fulfilled, and in that sense it was no longer a prophecy.

Likewise “tongues” have a “limited life”: “*Wherefore tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not...*” (1 Cor. 14:22). When the knowledge of the Lord covers the earth as the waters cover the sea (Isa. 11:9) there will not be any need for tongues because all will believe. Tongues (and particularly the miraculous gift of tongues) will cease—there will not be any need for them.

Likewise there will not be any need for anyone to have more knowledge than anyone else because “*all will know Me from the least to the greatest*” (Jer. 31:34; Heb. 8:11). Consequently, in that sense, knowledge also will “fail”.

Likewise all of the other gifts will become redundant. However the exercise of love will never fail—it will never become redundant. Love will permeate the earth in all the ages to come—“*nation will not lift up sword against nation*” (Isa. 2:4); “*They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea*” (Isa. 11:9).

Thus the challenge for the Christian of not allowing love to fail in their present life is pre-emptive to the situation which will exist on the earth when God’s kingdom is established. How truly James 1:18 expresses the truth of the matter: “*Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures*”—the development in the present life of a love that never fails is one aspect of being a firstfruit unto God.■

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