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LOOKING BACK

Hindsight is a wonderful thing: it is so easy to be wise with hindsight.

Hindsight involves looking back. It enables a comparison of the present and the past; it enables the changes that have occurred to be identified; and it enables a decision to be made whether things should have been done differently. It also enables progress to be measured, that is, what stage of development has been reached.

Detecting change

The Apostle Paul explained the importance of identifying changes: *"This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers... Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth"* (2 Tim. 3:1-7). He continues: *"But evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived"* (2 Tim. 3:13). Mere discernment of the conditions listed by the Apostle (men loving themselves; covetousness; boasting; pride; blasphemy) does not require hindsight but only observation—such conditions are manifest without any knowledge of the past; without any need to look back. However discernment of change requires comparison of the past with the present: discernment of change requires looking back.

Importance of discerning change

Jesus told His disciples that discernment of change would be important because it would be a source of encouragement for them: *"And there shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars; and upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring; 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... And when these things begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh"* (Luke 21:25-28). The disciples were to look for the **commencement** of the things Jesus had told them about—in other words

they were to be aware of the differences between the situation in the past and that which would eventuate.

Falling away

Some significant changes have occurred during the last 50 years or so and they provide first-hand knowledge of where the world is on God's time-line.

One such change is the falling away foretold by the Apostle Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2:3: *"...that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first..."*.

One evidence in Australia of the falling away is the discontinuation of the broadcast of church services by radio and television stations. In the mid-1950s, the then Australian Broadcasting Commission (the federal government broadcaster—now the Australian Broadcasting Corporation) broadcast a church service every Sunday during prime time, as well as "Sunday School of the Air". Neither of those services is broadcast today. Additionally, some of the commercial radio stations made provision for individual religious groups to broadcast their own programs, some of which were broadcast on Sundays. Today many of those opportunities have been withdrawn and the time devoted to entertainment for the younger generation.

In This Issue

Looking Back	1
In Divers Manners	4
Peter's Last Message	6
God and Israel	7
Israel's WaTec Exhibition	9
The Salt of the Earth	10
Whatsoever Things are Honest	12

Going back a little further, to approximately 1900 AD, the change is more stark. Reports are that the sermons of Charles Taze Russell were published in more than 300 newspapers in the United Kingdom alone, with a readership of approximately 12,000,000. Attendances at his lectures in the Albert Hall in London tallied in the thousands—it is estimated that the attendance at one meeting in 1910 was 7,500. For most people, travel in those days was more onerous than it is today, so their mere attendance was a witness to their spiritual fervour.

On another front it is reported that in 1905 Charles Russell despatched his co-worker Mr. M. L. McPhail to undertake pilgrim visits throughout the U.K. Mr. McPhail's mission established 70 churches (groups) who subsequently met regularly to study the Bible. Also 27,000 books, explaining the Bible as it was understood at that time, were sold during his mission.

Such observations highlight the “*falling away*” in spiritual interest which has occurred during the last 100 years or so. The falling away is more stark when it is remembered that the population today is greater than it was then and so the proportion of the population attending spiritual services is significantly less. Although the declining number of Bible students is reducing the opportunities for fellowship, the recognition of this change should be an inspiration to those who are looking for the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth—the “*falling away*” has commenced!

Consequences

Failure to perceive the changes occurring in the world has the potential to cultivate the mind-set which beset the scoffers of whom Peter wrote: “*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. For this they willingly are ignorant of, that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of the water and in the water: Whereby the world that then was, being overflowed with water, perished*” (2 Pet. 3:3-6). Peter's statement relates to changes that occurred in the distant past—the flood of Noah's day. Those of whom Peter wrote had not forgotten the flood but they had deliberately chosen not to allow it to have any influence in their lives—they were “willingly ignorant”. Similarly it behoves the Christian today to remember major events of the distant past and to be aware of other changes which have occurred in more recent times. Observation of the changes gives a clear indication where the present generation is in God's timetable, and so looking back is a necessary part of Christian awareness.

2011

In that context it is profitable to look back at some of the events of 2011.

One significant event was the unrest which swept through the Middle East. The unrest began in Tunisia and spread to Yemen, Egypt, Libya, and Syria. One characteristic of the unrest is that it did not arise from an invasion such as did World War II but it was an uprising from within.

In that context the prophecy recorded in Ezekiel 38:21 might be relevant: “*And I will call for a sword against him throughout all my mountains, saith the Lord GOD: every man's sword shall be against his brother*”. The conflict in the Middle East was, in large measure, Arab fighting Arab, Palestinian fighting Palestinian, Muslim fighting Muslim. The question may be asked whether the uprisings were a fulfilment, even in part, of Ezekiel's prophecy.

Travails

However in attaching any significance to those events it must be remembered that there have been civil wars in the past: the Wars of the Roses (1455-1487 A.D.), in which direct descendants of king Edward III fought each other, and the American Civil War (1861-1865) being two significant examples. Hence when making inferences it must be remembered that the time of the end will be characterised by “travails”: “*For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child...*” (1 Thess. 5:3). At this stage it is unknown whether the changes which occurred during 2011 will be of long standing or whether they are transitory “travails”.

Nevertheless the uprisings in the Middle East heighten the need “to watch”. The fact that there have been “*wars and rumours of wars*” (Matt. 24:6) in the past might lull some into thinking that indeed “*all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation*” (2 Pet. 3:3-4), and that the events of 2011 are insignificant, being merely repetitions of previous struggles. Consequently it is necessary to note the other events and conditions which are occurring simultaneously.

Finance

Another feature of 2011 was the volatility of the international stock markets and how movements in one market affected many others. In the past there was a period of time between the changes in one market (country) affecting the market in another country, but today the effect of any change almost immediately impacts on another. Such a rapid effect is facilitated by the means of communication available today: information can be transmitted

around the globe at almost the speed of light with many investors having interests in several countries.

Another noteworthy characteristic of the present stock markets is their interdependence, the concepts of an “International Monetary Fund” and a “G20 Summit” bearing testimony to their interdependency. In that vein the question may be asked whether the events of 2011 A.D. indicate that the prophecy of Isaiah 34:4 is in process of fulfilment: *“And all the host of heaven shall be dissolved, and the heavens shall be rolled together as a scroll: and all their host shall fall down, as the leaf falleth off from the vine, and as a falling fig from the fig tree”*. Is it possible the events of 2011 A.D. indicate the (financial) heavens are already (being) rolled together?

Another example of the heavens being rolled together is the advent of the “euro”, and the potential of its present precarious value to affect many countries.

The occupations

At a different level of physical violence, but at what might yet prove to be of almost equal significance, is “the occupations” that have occurred in some Western countries in October 2011. The occupations began with “Occupy Wall Street” in USA and quickly spread to New Zealand, England, Australia, Japan, Germany, France, Switzerland, and Italy. While these demonstrations are seemingly comparatively innocuous, their root cause is, in large measure, the same as those in the Middle East: the weak rising up against the strong; the poor against the rich; the have-nots against the haves. From an egalitarian perspective the uprisings are justified—estimates vary but it has been reported that 1% of the population of USA own or control 40% of the country’s assets, and 10% control more than 85%. The imbalance is deemed unacceptable by the underprivileged and they are not going to continue to tolerate it. At this stage the duration of the effect of the occupations is uncertain—is the disposition a spasm (travail) or is it something of longer standing?

In a nutshell the uprisings in the Middle East and the “occupation campaigns” in the West are shaking the heavenly powers. Just a few decades ago such demonstrators would have been imprisoned for treason—the ruling governmental powers would have quickly suppressed such protests.

Hand to the plough

The admonition to look back must be kept in context. From another perspective, “looking back” can be detrimental to the Christian. Jesus said: *“No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God”* (Luke 9:62). However Hebrews 10:32 reads: *“But call to remembrance the*

former days, in which, after ye were illuminated, ye endured a great fight of afflictions”. Thus the purpose of looking back must be clearly identified: on the one hand it can increase one’s zeal but on the other it must not excite a desire to return to the things which have been cast off.

Yet another aspect of looking back is that doing so must not cause discouragement. The Apostle Paul wrote: *“...this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus”* (Phil. 3:13-14). Had Paul continued to look back on his previous deeds he could have become very remorseful: *“For ye have heard of my conversation in time past in the Jews’ religion, how that beyond measure I persecuted the church of God, and wasted it”* (Gal. 1:13). Paul put his previous life behind him, looked forward and embraced the ministry the Lord had given him: *“Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize?... I therefore so run...”* (1 Cor. 9:24-26).

Looking forward

Looking at the events of 2011 should encourage the Christian to more earnestly pray *“thy kingdom come”* because no earthly government can claim or promise a fully peaceful and prosperous society.

Indeed the yearning for the establishment of the kingdom has been so keenly held in times past that there have been several predictions about when it will be fully established. However, in spite of history showing the predictions were incorrect, the Christian is to continue to look forward with confidence to the establishment of the kingdom: *“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”* (Hab. 2:3).

Nations to look back

Yet another perspective is that, at some time in the future, the nations will “look back”. A knowledge of history will be one of the means by which the world of mankind will be instructed: *“And the heathen shall know that the house of Israel went into captivity for their iniquity: because they trespassed against me, therefore hid I my face from them, and gave them into the hand of their enemies...”* (Ezek. 39:23). The heathen will look back at the history of Israel and thereby realise that they cannot continue to indulge in iniquity and retain God’s favour. However, on the other hand the conditions then existing will be so wonderful that *“...the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind”* (Isa. 65:17). When the kingdom of God is fully established on earth there will not be any looking back.■

IN DIVERS MANNERS

“God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son...” (Hebrews 1:1-2).

In Old Testament times, God used a variety of methods to communicate with His people. In New Testament times His methods are still varied but they are significantly different from previously.

The Old Testament is comprised of what would be expected of a sacred volume. There are legislative works such as that of Moses, songs expressive of religious feelings such as the Psalms, predictions of the future and histories in a continuous series which trace the fortunes of the chosen people.

On the other hand a large proportion of the New Testament is taken up with correspondence. It lays what may be regarded as the foundation of Christianity in narrative, with the first and greatest development of Christian theology not being in any set and formal treatise, not in liturgies and canon, not in works of devotion but in a collection of letters.

Means

The prophets of the Old Testament frequently either appeared in person or sent messengers to speak for them by word of mouth. Such personal presentations were possible because, *inter alia*, Palestine was a small country. However there were occasions when they sent letters, such as the letter of Elijah to Jehoram (2 Chron. 21) and the king of Syria sending a letter to the king of Israel (2 Kings 5).

Personal presentation was not always possible after the Christian Church spread and consisted of a number of scattered posts stretching from Mesopotamia in the east to Rome or even Spain in the west. Consequently it was only natural that the Apostle Paul, who had founded the majority of the churches, had to communicate with them by letter. Doing so was made possible by the general diffusion of the Greek language and also by the world being at peace at that time, held together by the organised rule of Imperial Rome.

Delegates

In order to appreciate the reasons for the variety in the ministry it is necessary to also consider the manner by which the church was established and organised by Paul. He travelled with a small band of co-workers who, as the occasion arose, he despatched as delegates to the churches. Sometimes they faced the task of bringing order into the churches, as the challenges which confronted Timothy and Titus (1 Tim. 1:3; 2:1; Titus 1:5), and sometimes to admonish

the believers because of their conduct (1 Cor. 4:17). On another occasion he sent Tychicus to comfort them by assuring them of his welfare (Eph. 6:21-22).

Many ministers

Paul instructed Titus to appoint elders in every city, which was the arrangement in the Jewish synagogues. However there were also touring teachers, whose understanding was not always mature, such as those mentioned in Galatians 2:12-13. Their action in persuading the Jewish believers, including Peter, not to eat with the Gentiles was incorrect: *“For before that certain came from James, he did eat with the Gentiles: but when they were come, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing them which were of the circumcision. And the other Jews dissembled likewise with him; insomuch that Barnabas also was carried away with their dissimulation”*.

2 John 10 also implies there were other “teachers” who did not present the truth accurately: *“If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed”*. So it was a varied scene.

Further, there was a variety of workers who each had a part to play in the building up of the spiritual life of the church: *“apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers”* (Eph. 4:13). Consequently the unity of purpose which existed amongst them is remarkable.

Structure

The components of the New Testament may be classified into types of literature: personal letters, letters of thanks, letters in deep distress at failures in the church and formal statements of doctrine. In summary it contains:

- 4 synoptic gospels (summary accounts);
- 1 narrative account (Acts of the Apostles);
- 5 letters, written primarily to give instruction regarding personal conduct;
- 6 letters of exhortation or encouragement;
- 3 writings setting out in a logical order an explanation of what God has done for mankind;
- 4 letters of a personal nature, written to friends;
- 3 letters, written to instruct the apostolic delegates; and
- 1 apocalyptic writing which uses images of vivid symbolism (Revelation).

The books and letters of the New Testament were written by eight or nine different authors, and

consequently some variations in the records are to be expected due to the personalities of the authors; they observed different aspects and gave different emphasis to some events. When viewed this way the various accounts do not contradict each other—the message of salvation is sustained throughout.

Such harmony, yet diversity, is consistent with the oversight God exercised over the writers of the Old Testament—they were “*Holy men who spake as they were moved by the spirit of God*” (2 Pet. 1:21); they wrote over a period of several centuries, yet they proclaimed a message consistent with God’s plan.

Individuality

Another fact which signifies that a common spirit (and not dogma) pervades the writings is that individuality of style of the authors is not suppressed. Some examples of the differences in expressions are:

- The phrase “The kingdom of God” occurs 15 times in Mark’s gospel and 33 times in Luke, but only 5 times in Matthew and twice in John;
- The phrase “kingdom of heaven” occurs only in Matthew and not in any of the other gospels;
- “Eternal Life” (or “life eternal”) occurs only twice in Matthew, nine times in John’s gospel and in only 30 verses altogether in the New Testament (which may be surprising in view of the fact that the purpose of Jesus’ coming to earth was that mankind could have eternal life: “*And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life*” (John 3:14-15); and: “*Then said Jesus unto the twelve, Will ye also go away? Then Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life*” (John 6:67-68).

Another example of the preservation of the individuality of the writer, yet their messages being harmonious, is the **events** they recorded. One example is the appearance of the angel to Mary (Luke 1:30)—only Luke recorded it; the other gospel writers did not—whereas the incident when a woman touched the hem of Jesus’ garment is recorded by Matthew, Mark and Luke but not by John.

The individuality of the writers is also evident from the **details** they recorded—only Matthew and Mark recorded the names of the women at the cross.

And so it is evident that the Christian message has been given in a diverse set of writings by people with different backgrounds and interests, each recording in their own way incidents from a diverse set of circumstances.

Indeed God has provided a source of information which addresses every aspect of human life, with the lesson that no part may be disregarded—it is fallacy to concentrate only on the writings which explain Christian philosophy (such as the letter to the Romans, Hebrews and maybe Ephesians) and to ignore the other testimonies—the Word must be considered in its entirety.

No creed

There is no set of mechanical rules by which one can gain an understanding of the Bible: insight into the secrets of God’s plan are reserved for those to whom He has given His Holy Spirit: “... *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. But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit....*” (1 Cor. 2:9-10).

The fellowship

Consequently, as is to be expected, the fellowship of the Lord’s chosen is comprised of persons with widely differing experiences and talents, and none can be ignored—each has an understanding of some aspect of the Word, or manifests some quality of character, which is profitable for encouragement and enlightenment of the other members of the body.

A unique message

The message of salvation is unique. The Bible is consistent throughout, but to appreciate the wonderful harmony of the message requires Bible study and recognition of the differences in emphasis given by its writers, including the lessons to be learned from the analogies and parables articulated in its pages. In all the spirit of God permeates the message. However when the collapse of the Roman Empire resulted in the loss of public education and the rise of widespread illiteracy, all learning and study of the scriptures was restricted to the monasteries, which in turn led to scholars producing massive volumes of dogma and morality statements which claimed to explain the scriptures but which in reality had little connection with the Biblical text. In that context the believers at Berea were privileged in that they were able to “*search the Scriptures*” (Acts 17:10-11).

So then, a review of the ways and means by which God has brought the message of salvation to mankind should result in one marvelling at His majesty. He has revealed His purposes to those whom He has called, but at the same time He has concealed His purposes from those whom He has not called. As the Apostle Paul wrote: “*O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgements and His ways past finding out*” (Rom. 11:33).■

PETER'S LAST MESSAGE

The Apostle Peter filled James' specification of being “*a doer of the word and not a hearer only*” (Jas. 1:22). However in both the physical and mental senses, at times he acted impulsively, one incident being when he saw One, who claimed to be Jesus, walking on the water. The record reads: “*And when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, ‘it is a spirit’; and they cried out for fear. But straightway Jesus spake unto them, saying, ‘Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid’. And Peter answered him and said, ‘Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee on the water’. And he said, ‘Come’. And when Peter was come down out of the ship, he walked on the water to go to Jesus. But when he saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink, he cried, saying, ‘Lord, save me’. And immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and caught him, and said unto him, ‘O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?’*” (Matt. 14:26-31).

In like fashion it was Peter who drew his sword and cut off the ear of the high priest's servant at the time of Jesus' arrest (John 18:10). It was Peter who proclaimed he would never deny the Master but who did so before the cock crowed three times (Matt. 26:34). Consequently it is understandable that, after Jesus' resurrection, the angel specifically instructed the women at Jesus' tomb to tell Peter that He was risen: “*Go your way, tell his disciples, and Peter...*” (Mark 16:7).

It was Peter who “*rose up*” and disputed with the Pharisees at Jerusalem regarding the need for the Gentiles to be circumcised after Paul and Barnabas had experienced “*no small dissension and disputation*” (Acts 15:2, 7, 14).

After Saul's (Paul's) conversion it was Peter who Paul contacted first, and with whom he stayed “*fifteen days*” (Gal. 1:17-19).

However, on the other hand, it was Peter who led Barnabas astray at Antioch regarding eating with the Gentiles—when “*certain came from James he withdrew and separated himself*”, with the result that “*other Jews dissembled likewise with him; insomuch that Barnabas also was carried away with their dissimulation*” (Gal. 2:11-14).

It was after such a virile ministry that Peter wrote his two epistles. He knew his work was done but he ministered until his last: “*Wherefore I will not be negligent to put you always in remembrance of these things, though ye know them, and be established in the*

present truth. Yea, I think it meet, as long as I am in this tabernacle, to stir you up by putting you in remembrance; Knowing that shortly I must put off this my tabernacle, even as our Lord Jesus Christ hath shewed me. Moreover I will endeavour that ye may be able after my decease to have these things always in remembrance” (2 Pet. 1:12-15). He knew his remaining time on this earth was short, nevertheless his major concern was for the welfare of the believers after his demise.

Second epistle

Peter's second epistle is his final message to the saints. It reflects his lifetime of hard lessons, humility, steadfastness, the joy of the truth and his efforts to feed the Lord's sheep.

He commences his letter with a prayer: “*Grace and peace be multiplied unto you*” (2 Pet. 1:2). After all the experiences of his ministry, he acknowledges that it is only by God's grace, and the peace which God gives to those whom He has blessed with a knowledge of His plan, who are able to develop the characteristics he lists in the following verses: faith, virtue (valour, maturity), knowledge, temperance, patience, godliness, brotherly kindness and love. Further, it is only if those fruits are “*in them and abound*” that they will not “*be barren or unfruitful in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ*” (2 Pet. 1:8).

His message concludes with warnings of three assaults believers would experience.

False prophets

Firstly he warned them of false prophets: “*But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them... And many shall follow their pernicious ways; by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of*” (2 Pet. 2:1-2).

There is much evidence which testifies to the veracity of Peter's prophecy. Ever since Peter wrote his epistle there have been teachers who have preached doctrines contrary to the gospel, turning it into a message of fear rather than a message of “*good news of great joy which shall be unto all people*” (Luke 2:10). Additionally, consistent with the meaning of the Greek word “heresy”, they have created their own sect, just as it was in Peter's day: “*Then the high priest rose up, and all they that were with him, (which is the sect of the Sadducees,) and were filled with indignation*” (Acts 5:17).

Scoffers

Peter also told them there would be scoffers in the last days. In some senses scoffers are directly opposite to false teachers—false teachers proclaim what they understand to be “the word of God” but, as it was in Jesus’ day, they err, “...teaching for doctrines the commandments of men” (Matt. 15:9).

However scoffers discredit the Word, saying: “*Where is the promise of his coming, for all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation*” (2 Pet. 3:3-4). The scoffers deny there has been any change and that there will be any change—everything will remain as it is “today”. However Peter reminds his readers that the same attitude existed before the Flood came and destroyed the world that then was, and that the scoffers were not to cause them to lose faith in the prophecies given in the Old Testament: “*But the heavens and the earth which are now are reserved unto fire against the day of judgment of the perdition of ungodly men*” (2 Pet. 3:7).

Time frame

Thirdly, Peter reminded his readers of the assault which would be mounted by those who would not understand God’s time frame. The reminder remains pertinent in 2012. While it may be contended the “heavens” are currently being destroyed—the demise of the ruling powers during the last 12 months, and the decrease in Christian church attendance during recent decades particularly, bearing testimony to the

fact—Peter reminds his readers not to forget the time frame of God’s plan: “*Beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing, that the day of the Lord is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day*” (2 Peter 3:8). A realisation of God’s time frame is necessary to thwart the contention of the scoffers that God’s plan has failed (assuming they admit there is a God). On the contrary, the believers were to reassure themselves that “*the Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness*” (2 Pet. 3:9), but rather it is as the prophet Habakkuk declared: “*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*” (Hab. 2:3). In spite of the scoffers, the Christians’ focus is to be on the future: “*nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness*” (2 Pet. 3:13). The fulfilment of the promise is assured because “*he is faithful that promised*” (Heb. 10:23).

Peter’s last words do not require any explanation. They are words of exhortation for every believer and have been relevant all down the Age: “*Wherefore, beloved, seeing that ye look for such things, be diligent that ye may be found of him in peace, without spot, and blameless... beware lest ye also, being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own stedfastness. But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and for ever. Amen*” (2 Pet. 3:14-18).■

GOD AND ISRAEL

The nation of Israel is God’s chosen nation: “*For the LORD has chosen Jacob for Himself, Israel for His special treasure*” (Psa. 134:4). Consequently God’s dealings with Israel are a significant feature of His plan for mankind.

Matthew 23:37 records Jesus’ feelings for Israel: “*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings...*”. The action of a hen gathering her chickens under her wings is perhaps the utmost expression of love and protection amongst all earthly creatures, and hence it portrays Jesus’ deep love and affection for Israel.

The Apostle Paul echoes Jesus’ sentiments: “*I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart. For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh*” (Rom. 9:1-3). Paul also had deep affection for

Israel, and their rejection of Jesus as the Messiah caused him to have “*great heaviness and continual sorrow*” in his heart.

Origin

In order to understand Israel’s privileged position and destiny it is necessary to understand its origin.

The nation of Israel was born when God told Abram to leave his home country: “*Now the LORD had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house, unto a land that I will shew thee: And I will make of thee a great nation...*” (Gen. 12:1-2). The LORD promised Abram he would have a son and through his son a nation would be formed.

However the LORD also made known unto Abraham that his descendants would be in a country not their own and that they would be enslaved and mistreated for four hundred years: “*And he said unto Abram, Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and*

they shall afflict them four hundred years" (Gen. 15:13). However God also promised He would deliver them and give them a land which they would possess forever—the land of Canaan: "*And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee... all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.*" (Gen. 17:8). The promise was not dependent upon Abraham fulfilling any conditions—the promise of a land of their own was unconditional.

As God promised, Isaac was born to Abraham. Subsequently Isaac's wife Rebekah had two sons, Esau and Jacob. Jacob, although the younger, received Isaac's blessing and God changed his name to Israel (Gen. 32:28). Jacob had three wives who bore him twelve sons who became the founders of the twelve tribes of Israel. Thus God's promise to Abram to make of him a great nation was fulfilled.

History

Egypt was the country which "was not theirs" and in which they were "*enslaved four hundred years*". When God delivered them out of Egypt He brought them to Mt. Sinai where, by the hand of Moses, He gave them the laws and commandments they were to obey. They agreed to do so and thereby entered a covenant relationship with God (Exodus 19:16).

From that time the nation of Israel was held accountable for their actions. If they obeyed God's laws, He would bless them and they would live safely in the promised land. If they disobeyed Him they would be severely punished. As a nation they disobeyed and consequently, historically, the nation has been in turmoil and, at times, oblivion.

Nevertheless during that time the prophets continued to speak a message of comfort to the people even though God was pouring His anger upon them. Although some of the prophecies were unclear, when the time came for God to send their leader (His only begotten Son) they were in expectation of Him and they wondered if His fore-runner (John) was their leader: "*And as the people were in expectation, and all men mused in their hearts of John, whether he were the Christ, or not*" (Luke 3:15).

Their religious leaders rejected Jesus and handed Him over to the Roman authorities to be crucified. As Jesus was being taken to be crucified a large number of people followed Him, including women who mourned and wailed for Him. "*But Jesus turning unto them said, 'Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me, but weep for yourselves, and for your children. For, behold, the days are coming, in the which they shall say, 'Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bare, and the paps which never gave suck'. Then shall they begin to say to the*

mountains, 'Fall on us; and to the hills, Cover us'. For if they do these things in a green tree, what shall be done in the dry?" (Luke 23:27-31). Jesus was foretelling the punishment that would soon come upon the nation of Israel: Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in A.D. 70, the land was laid barren and the people scattered to the four corners of the earth.

God's plan for the future

Nevertheless God's plan was that they would not be dispersed forever but that He would gather them again into their own land: "*... behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that it shall no more be said, The LORD liveth, that brought up the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt; But, The LORD liveth, that brought up the children of Israel from the land of the north, and from all the lands whither he had driven them: and I will bring them again into their land that I gave unto their fathers*" (Jer. 16:14-15). However it was not until the nineteenth century (the 1800s) that God began to gather them. The process God planned took a considerable period of time, involving two world wars and terrible persecutions. Nevertheless the nation of Israel was reborn in May 1948 in spite of severe opposition from its Arab neighbours.

The establishment of the nation of Israel after so many centuries is a remarkable testimony of God's omnipotence. That it was part of His plan is testified by the revelation He gave to the prophet Ezekiel long before it began: "*The hand of the LORD was upon me, and carried me out in the spirit of the LORD, and set me down in the midst of the valley which was full of bones, And caused me to pass by them round about: and, behold, there were very many in the open valley; and, lo, they were very dry. And He said unto me 'Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel: behold, they say, Our bones are dried and our hope is lost: we are cut off for our parts. Therefore prophesy and say unto them, Thus saith the LORD God; Behold, O my people, I will open your graves, and cause you to come up out of your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel. And ye shall know that I am the LORD, when I have opened your graves, O my people, and brought you up out of your graves, And shall put my spirit in you, and ye shall live, and I shall place you in your own land: then shall ye know that I the LORD have spoken it, and performed it, saith the LORD*" (Ezek. 37:11-14).

Ezekiel was shown several aspects of God's plan for Israel and how He will fulfil His promises to them:

- The bones were very dry, beyond which any human being would imagine could live again;
- The bones pictured the house of Israel;
- God will put His spirit in them;
- Israel will be placed in their own land; and
- Then they will know their true God.

One aspect of the vision given to Ezekiel was that God would place His spirit in them. The Apostle Paul referred to this as removing their blindness: *“For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits; that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles be come in. And so all Israel shall be saved: as it is written, There shall come out of Zion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob: For this is my covenant unto them, when I shall take away their sins”* (Rom. 11:25-27). Just as certainly as the nation of Israel has been re-established and the Jews have a homeland (the land promised to their fathers), so will their blindness be removed: it is God’s covenant with them and God keeps His promises.

Just as certain as the promises that Israel would be returned to their own land and have their blindness removed is the promise that Israel will be the channel through which God will bless the whole world of mankind: *“And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the LORD’S house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. And many people shall go and say, ‘Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths’: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD*

from Jerusalem” (Isa. 2:2-3). Today it seems improbable that other nations will go to Israel for spiritual enlightenment, but it will be so.

Troubled times ahead

It is also prophesied that Israel will experience more troubled times before the nations will come to them to learn God’s ways. Bible students differ slightly regarding precisely which elements of the trouble have passed and which are still future, but one period is called “Jacob’s trouble”: *“Alas! For that day is great, so that none is like it: it is even the time of Jacob’s trouble; but he shall be saved out of it. For it shall come to pass in that day, saith the LORD of hosts, that I will break his yoke from off thy neck, and will burst thy bonds, and strangers shall no more serve themselves of him: But they shall serve the LORD their God, and David their king, whom I will raise up unto them”* (Jer. 30:7-9). However the time of trouble will be firmly under God’s control: *“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).

In a word, God’s dealings with Israel testify that He is both omnipotent and faithful (Heb. 10:23). ■

ISRAEL’S WATEC EXHIBITION

The sixth annual WaTec (Water Technology) Exhibition and Conference was held in Tel Aviv from November 15 to 17, 2011. It drew thousands of people from all over the world who came to see Israel’s ‘water miracle’ first-hand. There were large contingents from Africa, Asia, South America, Europe, U.S.A., Indonesia, India, Pakistan and Dubai.

The previous (fifth) exhibition in 2009 was attended by more than 20,000 visitors from 94 countries, including some from countries with which Israel does not have official relations. A common reason given by them for their attendance was “we are here to learn how to better manage our water economies”.

A Vietnamese representative commented: “What you are doing with water technology is amazing; if we could have a tenth of the technology you have here we would be fine” (Vietnam has a copious supply of water but they are battling contamination.)

A visitor from mainland China is reported as commenting: “We believe Israeli companies can help

us”. China is setting up a Water Treatment Industrial Park to attract Israeli companies to go to China and establish facilities to work on water management projects in partnership with Chinese companies.

One of the reasons for Israel’s pursuit of water technology is the shortage of water in Israel—they cannot develop their agricultural industry without water. In another area one company is working on removing sludge from sewage and turning it into fuel; while another company has developed a method of generating power using water flowing in a pipe.

For more information visit the WaTec website:
<http://www.watec-israel.com/>

Comment: Are these events fore-tastes of the fulfilment of Zechariah 8:23: *“Thus saith the Lord of hosts, ‘In those days it shall come to pass, that ten men shall take hold out of all languages of the nations, even shall take hold of the skirt of him that is a Jew, saying, ‘We will go with you: for we have heard that God is with you’”?* ■

THE SALT OF THE EARTH

In bygone days, in some parts of the world, salt was the medium used to pay employees; that is, many employees were paid with salt. The contemporary term “salary” is a legacy of the practice. Hence the contemporary expression “he’s not worth his salt” is symbolic language meaning the person’s output is less than what it should be for the salary (salt) they are being paid.

In the English language salt is used in other symbolic ways, one of which relates to a person’s speech. The expression: “you can take what he says with a pinch of salt” is a derogatory statement meaning the person is known to frequently distort the truth.

To His disciples Jesus said: “*Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men*” (Matt. 5:13). Salt that has “lost its savour” is salt that has become insipid, that is it has lost its flavour, as Luke 14:34 states: “*Salt is good: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be seasoned?*” (Luke 14:34). The function of seasoning is to add flavour, and so the question arises in what sense were the disciples (and those “*who believe on Him through their word*”—John 17:20) to “season” (flavour) the earth?

Present heavens and earth

In answering that question it is necessary to keep in mind the destiny of the present order: “*But the heavens and the earth, which are now, by the same word are kept in store, reserved unto fire against the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men*” (2 Pet. 3:7). Consequently any thought of the church influencing the world for good is contrary to God’s plan. Indeed “*evil men will wax worse and worse*” (2 Tim. 3:13) until the present order is destroyed. However that will not occur until the time has come for God to replace them with a new heavens and earth as the Apostle continues: “*Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness*” (2 Pet. 3:13). The new heavens and earth will be so superior to the present that “*... the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind*” (Isa. 65:17). Hence any involvement in secular affairs with the objective of preserving the present order is contrary to God’s plan—the Christian’s focus should be as expressed in Hebrews 13:14: “*... here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come*”; and Jesus’ words to Pilate: “*My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight...*” (John 18:36).

The day of visitation

Having reached that point it may be assumed that the Christian does not exert any influence at all in the world. However the ultimate benefit God might have in His plan for the small influences of a Christian must not be dismissed—a seed sown now, if it does not bear fruit in the present time, might bear in the new heaven and earth. The Apostle Peter wrote: “*Having your conversation honest among the Gentiles: that, whereas they speak against you as evildoers, they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation*” (1 Pet. 2:12). The Apostle was declaring that although words spoken today might bring slander they might be fruitful in the next Age. Consequently a word in season now, although seeming so little, might be very important in God’s plan. It was in that vein that Paul instructed Timothy to “*preach the word, be instant in season and out of season*” (1 Tim. 4:2), and to leave the results to God—“*Paul planted, Apollos watered, God gives the increase*” (1 Cor. 3:6). Many of God’s works start with small beginnings: “*For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little*” (Isa. 28:10).

The Christian perspective

The question then arises regarding the Christian’s attitude towards society today. In view of the fact that the present heavens and earth are to be dissolved to make way for the new heavens and earth, should the Christian co-operate with the laws of the land (and thereby run the risk of being allegedly supportive of the current regime) or should they agitate towards the dissolution of the present order? The Apostle Paul answers the question in his instructions to the Romans and his letter to Timothy.

Romans 13:5 reads: “*Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God... for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake*” (Rom. 13:1-5). While his instruction is clearly not to orchestrate the demise of any ruling power, it also does not suggest the Christian is to positively support any regime either.

Paul’s letter to Timothy

To Timothy Paul wrote: “*I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet*

and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour" (1 Tim. 2:1-3). They were to pray for a quiet and peaceable life because such conditions best enable a Christian to develop godliness and honesty: "And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace" (Jas. 3:18).

Praying for the powers that be means the Christian should not participate in any activity the purpose of which is to overthrow the powers God has sanctioned, but to abide the regime. However it is acknowledged that is easier said than done under some of the present dynasties.

Popularity

One of the prerequisites to exercise any persuasive power in the world is to be popular with the people. However popularity with the world is fraught with danger for the Christian. Jesus warned His disciples: "Woe unto you, when all men shall speak well of you! for so did their fathers to the false prophets" (Luke 6:26). As Jesus petitioned His father at the end of His earthly life: "I have given them thy word; and the world hath hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth..." (John 17:14-18). Sanctification means set apart.

Thus the appropriate mind-set for the Christian in the present environment is that of a stranger, as it was in Old Testament times: "These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth" (Heb. 11:13). Likewise for today the Apostle Peter wrote: "Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul" (1 Pet. 2:11). To this the Apostle Paul adds: "...what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty" (2 Cor. 6:16-18).

Lessons from the Law Covenant

The significance of salt is also apparent from a consideration of God's ordinance to the Israelites regarding their sacrifices—all of them had to be offered with salt: "No meat offering, which ye shall

bring unto the LORD, shall be made with leaven: for ye shall burn no leaven, nor any honey, in any offering of the LORD made by fire. And every oblation of thy meat offering shalt thou season with salt; neither shalt thou suffer the salt of the covenant of thy God to be lacking from thy meat offering: with all thine offerings thou shalt offer salt" (Lev. 2:11-13). Leaven was prohibited; salt was prescribed.

One significance of salt was to remind the Israelites their sacrifice was binding: "... All the heave offerings of the holy things... , which the children of Israel offer unto the LORD, have I given thee... by a statute for ever: it is a covenant of salt for ever before the LORD unto thee and to thy seed with thee" (Num. 18:19). However Jeroboam rose up against God and broke the covenant: "Ought ye not to know that the LORD God of Israel gave the kingdom over Israel to David for ever, even to him and to his sons by a covenant of salt? Yet Jeroboam the son of Nebat, the servant of Solomon the son of David, is risen up, and hath rebelled against his lord" (2 Chron. 13:5-6). The kingdom of Israel was given to David by a covenant of salt—signifying it was for ever—however Jeroboam's rebellion broke the continuity (but not the promise) of the kingdom.

The Christian's covenant of salt

The Apostle Paul exhorted "masters": "Let your speech be alway with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man" (Col. 4:6). Such speech necessitated having "salt in yourselves" (Mark 9:50) because "for of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh" (Luke 6:45). Speech that is seasoned with salt will reflect:

- Maturity of vision; that is, it will not be fanciful about the beauties of the present order (and thereby mislead some) but will emanate from a heart filled with faith and conviction in the promise of a new heavens and earth;
- Respect for the authorities of the land, realising that God has ordained them;
- Sobriety; not seeking popularity, but will be conscious they are strangers in the present order;
- Sincerity; it will not be frivolous or foolish.

The Christian's thoughts, words, affections and actions must all be seasoned with salt.

Isolation

Finally, the Apostles were sent forth as sheep amongst wolves (Matt. 10:16). Although not preserving the earth, they were not to let their witness (savour) diminish; they were not to lose their savour. They were always to remember they were "unto God a sweet savour, making manifest the savour of the knowledge of Christ in every place" (2 Cor. 2:14). It is in that sense that they were the salt of the earth. ■

WHATSOEVER THINGS ARE HONEST

After exhorting the believers at Philippi to think on things which were true (one corollary of which is that they were not to dwell on fiction), the Apostle Paul exhorts them to think only on those things which are honest: *“Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest... think on these things”* (Phil. 4:8).

In secular circles truthfulness and honesty may be regarded as synonymous, and hence the question arises why did the Apostle mention both?

The reason for him mentioning both is that there is a difference in the fundamental meaning of the parent Greek words used in the Scriptures to refer to truthfulness and honesty. The difference is that, in the Greek text, honesty means not only truthful but also honourable, that is, worthy of praise. Consistent with this definition the New King James Version uses “noble” instead of “honest” in Philippians 4:8.

And so the Apostle instructed the Philippians that it is not sufficient to merely occupy oneself with things which are true, but they should restrict their thinking to those things which are also honourable.

There are many aspects of human experience which are true but not honourable. One example is murder. Murders occur in society and the fact that they occur cannot be denied. However they are not honourable deeds and meditation on them does not cultivate the Christian mind.

One application of thinking only on things which are honest and not on other things is the amount of time a Christian should spend patronizing the entertainment media. Much of what is promulgated in the cinema, theatre, television, radio and printed media is based not only on fiction but also on crime and deceit. Consequently, if the Christian takes the Apostle Paul’s admonition to heart, they cannot spend time dwelling on them. The Christian’s battleground is the mind, as the Apostle Peter wrote: *“Wherefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober... as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation”* (1 Pet. 1:13-15).

Gravity

The Greek word translated “honest” in Philippians 4:8 occurs in only three other places in the New Testament: 1 Timothy 3:8, 11 and Titus 2:2. In the King James Version it is translated “grave” in all three instances, and in the New King James Version it is translated “reverent”. The New International Version uses the phrase “worthy of respect” in

Timothy and “temperate” in Titus 2:2. The qualities listed subsequently in 1 Timothy 3:8 and 11 specify the qualities which were to be regarded as “grave”, “temperate” or “respectful”: *“not double tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre”*.

Double tongued

The first characteristic of deacons is that they were not to be double tongued. Today the term “forked tongue” is often used; it means varying one’s “story” to appear palatable to those with whom they are communicating. Such variation is not honest (honourable) and the Christian is exhorted not to practise it. In the ultimate sense, pretence and fiction are in the same category, and hence the Christian is not to indulge in such activities.

Sobriety

Drunkenness also is not honourable and hence the Christian is exhorted to a life of sobriety: *“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”* (1 Pet. 1:13).

Filthy lucre

The third characteristic the Apostle specifies is *“not greedy of filthy lucre”*. The emphasis is on the adjective “filthy”—there is nothing wrong with accumulating noble gain, including unearned gain (that is, interest). Jesus referred to such gain in the parable of the talents, and deemed failure to make it as a short-coming: *“Thou oughtest therefore to have put my money to the exchangers, and then at my coming I should have received mine own with usury”* (Matt. 25:27).

In the sight of all men

Further, it is not sufficient to merely satisfy one’s own conscience regarding what is honest; the Christian must also ensure that their behaviour appears to be honest to all men: *“... Provide things honest in the sight of all men”* (Rom. 12:17). That standard does not require any outward show but conduct which is beyond reproach or suspicion.■

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