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THE MERCY OF GOD

"So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy"
(Romans 9:16).

Jesus said: "Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy" (Matt. 5:7).

Strong's Concordance defines mercy as: "compassionate (by word or deed, specifically by divine grace)". One secular definition of "compassion" is "a feeling of sorrow or pity for the sufferings or misfortune of another".

Jesus' words may be the basis of Paul's exhortation to the Galatians: "As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith" (Gal 6:10). The inclination to do good to another assumes one can improve the lot of the other, that is to have compassion for them.

Showing mercy may also be considered to be an aspect of love, and regarded as entwined in the fruits of the Spirit. Indeed one may wonder why mercy is not listed individually by Paul as one of the fruits of the spirit: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law" (Gal. 5:22-23).

Divine mercy

The fore-going relates to the relationships of mankind with each other and how the Christian should view his fellow human being.

Paul's words to the Romans--that it is God and God alone who shows mercy--refer to each individual's relationship with God.

In view of the suffering being experienced by mankind, Paul's words need to be interpreted in the context of the overall plight of Man, which in turn means in the overall Divine plan for mankind. Every individual--both Christian and non-Christian alike--is personally subject to God's over-ruling, and it is in that context that their welfare must be considered.

Hence is manifested the privilege of the Christian. It is only those who are privileged to understand God's plan for mankind (which spans several ages), and which ultimately will yield wonderful benefits to every human being who complies with God's arrangement when they have the opportunity and responsibility (that is, in "their time"), who are able to see that the present distress contains God's mercy. To those who are not privileged to know about the times of restitution which God has promised since the world began (Acts 3:21), God's dealings with mankind may be deemed "unfair" and contrary to the concept that God is love.

Omnipotence

In order to understand the mercy of God it is necessary to realise that God is omnipotent and has all things in His hand. God has the power and authority to use whom He wishes to achieve His purpose and It is in that context that His plan may be seen to be merciful.

One example of God using whom He pleases is His dealing with Pharaoh: "For the scripture saith

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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 hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth" (Rom. 9:17-18). God used Pharaoh for a specific purpose: to show His power to mankind which He will reveal to all mankind in accordance with His plan.

God's dealing with anyone means He has chosen them to perform His bidding. Every such idea may give the idea of prestige, which raises the question whether God does have his special favourites upon whom He bestows His gifts or uses them to His advantage, while denying such benefits and opportunity to others.

The answer to that question may be both yes and no, and is linked to the three words "in due time" in Paul's letter to Timothy: "*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; Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; Who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time*" (1 Tim. 2:1-6).

The "yes" case

The first point to understand and accept before one can appreciate that, at the present time, God shows favour to some more than to others is that He is indeed the creator and ruler of the universe. The consequences of Him being in total control has to be realised and not just idly acknowledged. Isaiah explains: "*Keep silence before me, O islands; and let the people renew their strength: let them come near; then let them speak: let us come near together to judgment. Who raised up the righteous man from the east, called him to his foot, gave the nations before him, and made him rule over kings? he gave them as the dust to his sword, and as driven stubble to his bow. He pursued them, and passed safely; even by the way that he had not gone with his feet. Who hath wrought and done it, calling the generations from the beginning? I the LORD, the first, and with the last; I am he*" (Isa. 41:1-4). Those verses express the absolute authority of God. The command "*keep silence O islands*" can be understood only if one understands that God is over them: the islands are inanimate, that is lifeless, and therefore cannot decide to "keep silence". The expression implies that God has complete control over all His creation, both lifeless (inanimate) and those to whom He has given life (animate).

Israel

Another example of God exercising His autonomy is Israel being His special people: "*For thou art an holy people unto the LORD thy God: the LORD thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth. The LORD did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people: But because the LORD loved you, and because he would keep the oath which he had sworn unto your fathers, hath the LORD brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you out of the house of bondmen, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the LORD thy God, he is God, the faithful God, which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations*" (Deut. 7:6-9). Israel did not have any virtues of themselves that gave God any grounds for choosing them above other nations.

In view of God's total authority over all things it is feasible that He has the power and authority to choose others beside the nation of Israel. It is not for His subjects to tell Him what He has done or what He should be doing but to learn His ways and to understand what He is doing; that is, to understand His Divine Plan of the Ages.

And that is Paul's message to the Corinthians: "*Howbeit we speak wisdom among them that are perfect: yet not the wisdom of this world, nor of the princes of this world, that come to nought: But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory: Which none of the princes of this world knew: for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God*" (1 Cor. 2:6-10).

Paul's letter urges them to understand what God is doing and to interpret events from God's level and not from their human level. As Paul stated, his message was not according to the wisdom of this world, not even the princes of this world understand His plan, and so a knowledge of God's plan and purpose is a treasure that God has made known only to those to whom He has given it. Thus, it might seem that, at the present time, God does "have His favourites".

Responsibility

Every opportunity brings responsibility, and the opportunity God has given to His "favourites"

brings responsibility: "Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb. 12:1-2). And "Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain. And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible. I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air: But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway" (1 Cor. 9:24-27). The Christian is to recognize their responsibility and "so run".

The "no" case

The argument can be mounted that while God has favoured some by showering them with His special blessing there are at least two features of this life that show He treats all men equally.

Regarding their subjection to the environment Jesus said: "But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matt. 5:44-45). Visual observation confirms that rain falls on those who are striving to be upright and those who do not strive in that way.

Jesus' words have greater impact for those who directly—that is, first hand—rely on agriculture for their food supply, which is an aspect of life that is shielded from view of many due to the impact of industrialisation which "guarantees" a ready and reliable supply of food, water and "basic" services.

Secondly, as Solomon concluded: "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" (Eccl. 1:13-14).

Solomon continues and explains the reason for his conclusion: "For all this I considered in my heart even to declare all this, that the righteous,

and the wise, and their works, are in the hand of God: no man knoweth either love or hatred by all that is before them. All things come alike to all: there is one event to the righteous, and to the wicked; to the good and to the clean, and to the unclean; to him that sacrificeth, and to him that sacrificeth not: as is the good, so is the sinner; and he that sweareth, as he that feareth an oath. This is an evil among all things that are done under the sun, that there is one event unto all: yea, also the heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live, and after that they go to the dead. For to him that is joined to all the living there is hope: for a living dog is better than a dead lion" (Ecc. 9:1-4). Simple observation of Man's life span and rewards at the present time on this earth vindicate Solomon's conclusion that all of Man's efforts are futile, ending in death.

Times of Restitution

And therein lies one of the secrets of God's plan. It is summarized by Paul in Romans 8:18-23: "For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God. 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"

Paul's words declare some critical points that are essential to understand God's mercy:

- The creature (creation) is waiting for a previous work to be completed: the manifestation of the Sons of God. The Sons of God are those to whom God has given His Holy Spirit: "The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together. For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God" (Rom. 8:16-19);
- God has deliberately (consciously) subjected the present creature (creation) to the vanity Solomon identified, and He has subjected it in "hope" (anticipation, expectation, confidence);
- The whole creation will be delivered from the

present bondage to corruption (the vanity of this life): "And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away. And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. And he said unto me, Write: for these words are true and faithful" (Rev 21:3-5);

- Nevertheless those whom God has enlightened continue to groan within themselves because they have compassion for their fellow man as they both endure the pains of this life.

The lesson learned

There is an old saying "sometimes you have to be cruel to be kind". While that is a secular saying it contains an element of truth in respect of God's dealing with His human creation.

An understanding of all the points mentioned above—from Adam's disobedience in Eden to the present time—is necessary to understand how mankind's present battle with sickness, poverty and death can in any way be considered to be compassionate (a feeling of sorrow or pity for the sufferings or misfortune of another) on God's part.

And just not showing mercy but also being the only one who shows any mercy: "So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy" (Rom. 9:16).

The key is that the present experience will result in mankind being fully appreciative of the blessings God will shower on them in His time: "For, behold, I create new heavens and a new earth: and the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind. But be ye glad and rejoice for ever in that which I create: for, behold, I create Jerusalem a rejoicing, and her people a joy: (Isa. 65:17-18). The joys of that time will mean that the trials of the present time will be not be remembered and hence there will not be any temptation to return to the present distress: "What do ye imagine against the LORD? he will make an utter end: affliction shall not rise up the second time" (Nahum 1:9).■

OUR LORD'S MEMORIAL

According to our usual reckoning the time for the observance of the Memorial of our Lord's death in 2018 will be the evening of Thursday March 29th (14th Nisan). 1Cor 11:23-26

THINGS THAT ARE BROKEN

God uses those people and things which are broken to show His glory:

- It was the overthrow of Jacob's natural strength at Peniel that made him one whom God clothed with power;
- It was when the three hundred elect soldiers under Gideon broke their pitchers that the hidden lights of the lamps shone forth to the consternation of the Midianites;
- It was when Jesus took the five loaves and broke them that the bread was multiplied sufficient to feed five thousand;
- It was when Mary broke her beautiful alabaster box, rendering it henceforth useless, that the pent-up perfume filled the whole house;
- It was when Jesus' body was broken that his life was poured out and He became the ransom price to release all mankind from the sentence of death;
- It is when a grain is sown (broken) in the earth that it brings forth fruit;
- It was when the Lord broke Saul's spirit that He shed upon him the riches of Divine grace and changed his name to Paul;
- It was the broken loaf that Jesus invited His disciples to eat and by which they were to remember Him: "And when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me" (1 Cor. 11:24).
- It is with His rod that He will break the spirit of the nations as a potter may break vessels;
- It will be then that *he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I received of my Father* (Rev. 2:27)
- It will be when He has broken the spirit of the nations that He will turn to the people a pure language that will enable them to serve Him with one consent;
- It will be when He has broken the devil's influence over the nations and handed the kingdom back to God that God will be all in all.■

CONVENTION BROADCAST

The annual convention sponsored by the Berean Bible Institute Inc. is to be held from 5.00 pm Thursday 25 January until after lunch on Sunday January 28, 2018.

For details and the program see:

www.bbi.org.au/node/385

The broadcast link for the broadcast will be:

<http://biblestudents.adobeconnect.com/australia>

LIGHT IN DARKNESS

"Unto the upright there ariseth light in the darkness: he is gracious, and full of compassion, and righteous" (Psalm 112:4)

This article is based on the opening address at the Melbourne, Australia, Christian Convention on 25 December 1940, now 77 years ago. It is printed here because it confirms that the hope of the brethren at that time was the same as it is today: "Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and today, and for ever" (Heb. 13:8).

Maybe the assurance of "light arising out of darkness" was particularly precious at that time because the whole world was once again plunged into war: 1940 was "shortly" after USA President Woodrow Wilson had proclaimed that World War 1 was "the war to end all wars".

President Wilson did not know the events that were to transpire during the remainder of the twentieth century. And it was not only President Wilson who did not know what awaited the world during the twentieth century; God had not yet revealed to anyone the details of His plan for that period. Maybe some of the brethren present at that convention were familiar with the expectation taught about 30 years prior that God would establish His kingdom of peace on earth in about 1915-16. The onset of another global war in 1939 was contrary to those expectations. And so in the twenty-first century, as the prophecies recorded in the Old Testament are being continually revealed in increasing light, Jesus' words are being vindicated: "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away. But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only. But as the days of Noe were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be" (Matt. 24:35-37).

Some Bible students believe that God has now revealed the time when He will begin the constructive phase of the times of restitution: "And he shall send Jesus Christ, which before was preached unto you: Whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began" (Acts 3:20-21). The details of the sequence in which the restitution will be accomplished is another subject and is not the purpose of this article.

Looking back

One of the events that had not been revealed in 1940 was when God would establish Israel as a sovereign State in the Promised Land. That

happened in May 1948, only a little more than 7 years later. Bible students knew it was prophesied: *"Therefore say unto the house of Israel, Thus saith the Lord GOD; I do not this for your sakes, O house of Israel, but for mine holy name's sake, which ye have profaned among the heathen, whither ye went. And I will sanctify my great name, which was profaned among the heathen, which ye have profaned in the midst of them; and the heathen shall know that I am the LORD, saith the Lord GOD, when I shall be sanctified in you before their eyes. For I will take you from among the heathen, and gather you out of all countries, and will bring you into your own land. Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them. And ye shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; and ye shall be my people, and I will be your God"* (Ezek. 36:22-28). However while many were aware of the prophecy they did not know the precise date when God would fulfil it,

While the nation of Israel has now been established in its own land for almost 70 years, there are some details of Ezekiel's prophecy that have not yet been fulfilled, for example "*the heathen shall know that I am the Lord*": In general terms the Gentile nations do not yet understand that the establishment of Israel in their land might be part of the fulfillment of Ezekiel's prophecy let alone acknowledge it.

The upright

The term "upright" in Psalm 112 does not mean perfect. If it meant "perfect", no human being would have any knowledge of God's plan—no light would have been given—because, as Paul wrote to the Romans: "...: for we have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin; As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one" (Rom. 3:9-10).

One concordance defines "upright" as "straight (literally or figuratively)", and it is in both the literal and figurative senses that God regarded as upright, several who lived in Old Testament times. Noah is one example: "These are the generations

of Noah: *Noah was a just man and perfect in his generations, and Noah walked with God*" (Gen. 6:9). In spite of being "just and perfect in his generations", Noah died—"And all the days of Noah were nine hundred and fifty years: and he died" (Gen. 9:29)—which is in accord with Romans 3 and which shows that, in the absolute sense the terms "just", "perfect" and "upright" need to be interpreted in their context.

Considering the nation of Israel in particular, compliance with the rituals and requirements of the Law Covenant did not make them perfect, even though the requirements for a man to be regarded as "just" under the terms of the Law Covenant were within the capability of human beings. Ezekiel wrote: "*The word of the LORD came unto me again, saying, What mean ye, that ye use this proverb concerning the land of Israel, saying, The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge? As I live, saith the Lord GOD, ye shall not have occasion any more to use this proverb in Israel. Behold, all souls are mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is mine: the soul that sinneth, it shall die. But if a man be just, and do that which is lawful and right... And hath not oppressed any, but hath restored to the debtor his pledge, hath spoiled none by violence, hath given his bread to the hungry, and hath covered the naked with a garment; He that hath not given forth upon usury, neither hath taken any increase, that hath withdrawn his hand from iniquity, hath executed true judgment between man and man, hath walked in my statutes, and hath kept my judgments, to deal truly; he is just, he shall surely live, saith the Lord GOD*" (Eze. 18:1-9). The standards specified by Ezekiel did not require perfection, just noble, just or upright conduct.

David

David also was upright: "...*David did that which was right in the eyes of the LORD, and turned not aside from any thing that he commanded him all the days of his life, save only in the matter of Uriah the Hittite*" (1 Kings 15:5). David's sin is recorded in 2 Samuel chapters 11 and 12: "*And when the mourning was past, David sent and fetched her to his house, and she became his wife, and bare him a son. But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD*" (2 Sam 11:27); "*And David said unto Nathan, I have sinned against the LORD. And Nathan said unto David, The LORD also hath put away thy sin; thou shalt not die*" (2 Sam. 12:13). The Lord put David's sin away and regarded David as upright even though he transgressed. The Lord looked upon David's heart and not on his every deed: "... he raised

up unto them David to be their king; to whom also he gave testimony, and said, *I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after mine own heart, which shall fulfil all my will. Of this man's seed hath God according to his promise raised unto Israel a Saviour, Jesus*" (Acts 13:22-23).

While neither Noah nor David were perfect in the absolute sense—both died—they were shining lights in their time, just as Daniel was a light in his time: "*Then was Daniel brought in before the king. And the king spake and said unto Daniel, Art thou that Daniel, which art of the children of the captivity of Judah, whom the king my father brought out of Jewry? I have even heard of thee, that the spirit of the gods is in thee, and that light and understanding and excellent wisdom is found in thee*" (Dan. 5:13-14).

Responsibility

While the term "upright" does not mean "perfect" it does require righteous conduct which must always be exhibited, just as it was with David: "*Then Achish called David, and said unto him, Surely, as the LORD liveth, thou hast been upright, and thy going out and thy coming in with me in the host is good in my sight: for I have not found evil in thee since the day of thy coming unto me unto this day: nevertheless the lords favour thee not*" (1 Sam. 29:6).

And so it is today. Observance of the law of the land is necessary to let one's light shine before all men: "*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: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation*" (Rom. 13:1-2).

The only condition that justifies the Christian from not abiding by the law of the land is if such observance would conflict with the principles of their "... *conversation in heaven...*" (Phil. 3:20). "Conversation" is translated from the Greek word "politeuma" which Dr. Strong states may be an abstract word and it may have a figurative meaning of citizenship—Philippians 3:20 is the only verse where "politeuma" occurs.

Righteous conduct

The Christian must not engage in activities or actions that the world would deem to be transgressing the law of the land. For example the Christian must not commit murder: "*If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye; for the spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you: on their part he is evil spoken of, but on your part he is glorified. But let none of you*

suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men's matters" (1 Pet. 4:14-15).

It might be considered easy to guard against three of the evils listed by Peter—murder, thieving, evil doer—but the fourth one may be more subtle: "a busybody in other men's matters". The desire to always be helpful—to edify—one's brethren must always be in the forefront of the Christian's mind, but there comes a point where a willingness to be helpful becomes an intrusion. Watchfulness unto prayer is required to correctly identify the boundary.

Esteem

The Christian must not expect to be applauded for their uprightness, but on the other hand they are to be aware of the wiles of the Adversary: "Woe unto you, when all men shall speak well of you! for so did their fathers to the false prophets" (Luke 6:26). It will not be until the kingdom age that mankind will recognize and acknowledge the example the Christian displays in this present life: "Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul; 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. 2:11-12). In the meantime it is as Jesus said: "Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake" (Matt. 5:11).

Arising light

It is in that vein that the words of the Psalmist are to be understood: "unto the upright there ariseth light in the darkness".

The concept of "arising light" does not mean the Christian is to expect to illuminate those around them with a knowledge of God's truth because unless "except the LORD build the house, they labour in vain that build it: except the LORD keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain" (Psa. 127:1). It is God who calls and who gives light: "But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light" (1 Pet. 2:9). It is the Christian's duty to let their light shine so that all whose eyes God has opened may see. But presently "we know that we are of God, and the whole world lieth in wickedness. And we know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, that we may know him that is true, and we are in him that is true, even in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life" (1 John 5:19-21).

Thus Psalm 112:4 presents a challenge to those to whom the Lord has given His Holy Spirit: "Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven" (Matt. 5:14-16).■

LOOK AND LIVE

Numbers 21:5-9 records Israel murmuring and complaining during their wilderness journey because they were hungry and thirsty. Rather than provide them with food and water God sent fiery serpents among them and many were bitten and died.

Moses was instructed to make a serpent of bronze and put it on a pole; whoever was bitten by a serpent and who looked up at the brazen serpent lived.

John explains that therein is a picture of God's plan for mankind: "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 have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:14-16).

Eventually every individual human being who looks to the serpent will have everlasting life.

However Paul explains that those whom God has called should take note of Israel's example in this present life: "Now these things were our examples, to the intent we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted... Neither let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed of serpents. Neither murmur ye, as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed of the destroyer. Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come" (1 Cor. 10:6-11).

And there is a further lesson: every individual had to look to the serpent and so every individual Christian has to look for themselves: "be fully persuaded in their own mind" (Rom. 14:5)■

IF YE DO THESE THINGS

"Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure; for if ye do these things, you shall never fall" (2 Peter 1:10)

The phrase "make your calling and election sure" is an exhortation to faithfulness.

The exhortation is strengthened by continually calling to mind the reward that is offered to the overcomers: *"To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne"* (Rev. 3:21).

The reward

The reward—to sit with Christ in His throne—is the highest ever offered to any human being: the faithful of Old Testament times were not offered this reward even though they suffered greatly: *"...they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect"* (Heb. 11:38-40).

The overcomers will not only reign with Christ but be heirs of God: *"The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified"* (Rom 8:16-17).

The grandeur of being joint heirs with Christ is made more apparent by envisioning Christ's inheritance: *"I will declare the decree: the LORD hath said unto me, Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee. Ask of me, and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession"* (Psa. 2:7-8). At that time Jesus will "own" the Earth and all its inhabitants.

Entry

The opportunity to gain this high estate is one that God has bestowed on those whom He and His Son Jesus have chosen: *"Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you. Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain: that whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in my name, he may give it you"* (John 15:15-16). Remembering that it is God who has chosen anyone to be a joint heir with His Son Jesus, should encourage everyone who has been

given that opportunity to stretch every nerve to achieve the reward that has been offered to them.

Qualifications

Those who sit with Christ in His throne will be overcomers: Overcoming is not a matter of physical stature but of spiritual development, of growth in grace and knowledge: *"But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ"* (2 Pet. 3:18). The Hebrews were criticized for not having grown: *"For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil"* (Heb. 5:12-14).

Faith is the foundation of other qualities

In his second letter Peter lists the qualities that measure Christian growth, the first of which is faith: *"And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; And to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; And to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity. For if these things be in you, and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ"* (2 Pet. 1:5-8).

Faith is the first requirement: it is the foundation: *"Wherefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession, Christ Jesus; Who was faithful to him that appointed him, as also Moses was faithful in all his house. For this man was counted worthy of more glory than Moses, inasmuch as he who hath builded the house hath more honour than the house"* (Heb. 3:1-3). Hence "without faith it is impossible to please Him for he that cometh to God must believe that He is and is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him" (Heb. 11:6).

However faith alone is worthless: *"What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him? If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, And one of you say unto them, Depart in*

peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone. Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works" (Jas. 2:14-18).

Nature of faith

The Christian's faith is not a faith in people or things or even religious systems, rather it is a faith in God who is their heavenly Father.

Hebrews 11:1 reads: "*Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen*". Faith is different from hope. Hope may be merely wishful thinking, that is, what one desires; there does not need to be any basis for believing their hopes will be realised.

On the other hand faith is the assurance (conviction) that one's hopes will eventuate, that is, be realised or come about, even though they have not been seen: "*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. Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered*" (Rom. 8:23-26). If the things one hopes for are visible (seen) there is no need to hope that they will eventuate and hence there is no need for faith.

Growth

Once the basis of faith is established—the ransom sacrifice of Jesus Christ (1 Tim. 2:5-6)—it is necessary to understand and believe that God will bless all the families of the earth: "*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, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed*" (Gen. 12:1-3).

Critics may contend that there is not any evidence that God intends to fulfil His promise to Abram. Such critics are not privileged to understand and believe that God has given several signs that He will fulfil His promise, but He will do it in His time and not in the time frame expected by mankind. One manifestation that His plan is being accomplished is the coming to earth of His only Son Jesus who was crucified. His crucifixion, in itself, did not prove anything

except for the events that accompanied it: "*And it was about the sixth hour, and there was a darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour. And the sun was darkened, and the veil of the temple was rent in the midst. And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit: and having said thus, he gave up the spirit. Now when the centurion saw what was done, he glorified God, saying, Certainly this was a righteous man. And all the people that came together to that sight, beholding the things which were done, smote their breasts, and returned. And all his acquaintance, and the women that followed him from Galilee, stood afar off, beholding these things*" (Luke 23:44-49). The phenomena were so extraordinary that the centurion could not resist acknowledging that Jesus was a righteous man and consequently praised God.

The Apostle's faith

In spite of the lack of faith around them Paul wrote: "*Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful:* (1 Cor. 4:1-2). The Apostles had to be faithful, that is, continue to declare the things they hoped for but which were not yet seen. Such preaching required faith, that is, conviction that God will bring those things to pass: "*Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry. Therefore disputed he in the synagogue with the Jews, and with the devout persons, and in the market daily with them that met with him. Then certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the Stoicks, encountered him. And some said, What will this babbler say? other some, He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods: because he preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection. And they took him, and brought him unto Areopagus, saying, May we know what this new doctrine, whereof thou speakest, is? For thou bringest certain strange things to our ears: we would know therefore what these things mean*" (Acts 17:16-20). Paul met with opposition and so faith—conviction—that what he was preaching was required.

When the examples of many who have gone before, and carried out various activities because they were convinced (convicted) that God would bring about what He had told them—being things they hoped for but things that were not yet seen—the severity of the test of most Christians' faith is not extraordinary: "*Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is*

set before us, Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds. Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin" (Heb. 12:1-4).

Testing

The greatest example of all is that of Jesus who submitted to the Cross, there not having been anyone before Him who had suffered death and been raised to eternal life: "For even hereunto were you called because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example that ye should follow in his steps" (1 Pet. 2:21).

Jesus resisted unto blood; the blood of the Cross. Certainly there have been many since Jesus' time who have also resisted unto blood, and their example should be an additional encouragement to all who profess to be followers of Jesus Christ.

While the testing today might be considered to be less severe than those in Old Testament times, every Christian today endures testing, perhaps not the same physical pain and suffering but one that is subtle and which requires continuous vigilance to thwart. It is as Paul warned the Romans: "Be not conformed to this world but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Rom. 12:2). The present secular environment, in which many have food and raiment aplenty, and in which technology relieves them of the burden of earning their living by the sweat of their brow—"And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" (Gen. 3:17-19)—makes their test more pointed because they have to consciously cast off the temptations that surround them: "And that, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light. Let us walk honestly, as in the day; not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying. But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof" (Rom. 13:11-14).

When it is remembered that "The disciple is not above his master, nor the servant above his lord. It is enough for the disciple that he be as his master, and the servant as his lord. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more shall they call them of his household?" (Matt. 10:24-25), it should not come as any surprise that those who would share the reward of living and reigning with their Master will also be tested and despised by the master of Beelzebub's house.

God tested His Son's faithfulness before He considered Him victorious: "Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession. For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:14-15).

The lust of the flesh

In this context the words of John are pertinent: "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever" (1 John 2:15-17).

James also exhorts the believers to withstand the temptations of the world: "Do ye think that the scripture saith in vain, The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy? But he giveth more grace. Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble. Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (James 4:5-7). James' statement implies that they should have been aware of the snare of esteem; he challenges them to realise that the warning regarding vanity would not be given if it did not have some application—the Scriptures are not written in vain.

Hence the advice for the Christian who would be an overcomer is for them as Hebrews 12:1-2 expresses it: "wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God". They should also be assured that "God is faithful, who will not suffer them to be tempted above that ye are able but will make a way of escape that they are able to bear it" (1 Cor. 10:13).■

THE GIFT OF KNOWLEDGE

As the world enters the early days of the year 2018 A.D., it is a privilege to have been given a knowledge of God's plan for mankind.

All knowledge of God's plan is a gift from Him and not of human effort. Jeremiah recognized that he had been given the gift of fore-seeing some of the events to come: *"Then the word of the LORD came unto me, saying, Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations. Then said I, Ah, Lord GOD! behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child. But the LORD said unto me, Say not, I am a child: for thou shalt go to all that I shall send thee, and whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak. Be not afraid of their faces: for I am with thee to deliver thee, saith the LORD. Then the LORD put forth his hand, and touched my mouth. And the LORD said unto me, Behold, I have put my words in thy mouth"* (Jer. 1:4-9).

Challenge

However being a servant of the Lord and one to whom He had given knowledge brought challenges. One challenge was to pronounce to Judah and Jerusalem that God would punish them for their disobedience: *"The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD, saying, Hear ye the words of this covenant, and speak unto the men of Judah, and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem... Then the LORD said unto me, Proclaim all these words in the cities of Judah, and in the streets of Jerusalem, saying, Hear ye the words of this covenant, and do them... For the LORD of hosts, that planted thee, hath pronounced evil against thee... And the LORD hath given me knowledge of it, and I know it..."* (Jer. 11:1-2; 6, 17, 18).

Initially Jeremiah was timid, even though he did not know their plot against him: *"But I was like a lamb or an ox that is brought to the slaughter; and I knew not that they had devised devices against me..."* (Jer. 11:19). Their plot was to slay Jeremiah because he preached the word of the Lord to them: *"Therefore thus saith the Lord of the men of Anathoth, that seek thy life, saying, Prophesy not in the name of the Lord, that thou die not by our hand"* (Jer. 11:21). It was declaring the word of the Lord that provoked them to anger.

It was the same in the Apostle's day: *"Alexander the coppersmith did me much evil: the Lord reward him according to his works: Of whom be thou ware also; for he hath greatly withstood our*

words... notwithstanding the Lord stood with me, and strengthened me; that by me the preaching might be fully known, and that all the Gentiles might hear... And the Lord shall deliver me from every evil work, and will preserve me unto his heavenly kingdom: to whom be glory for ever and ever" (2 Tim. 4:14-18).

Recorded for our admonition

The question may be asked whether the record of Jeremiah's experience has been recorded for the benefit of Christian believers in our day, or whether only the examples mentioned by Paul have any relevance to Christian experience: *"Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come"* (1 Cor. 10:11).

Reviewing Jeremiah's experience suggests that reflecting on his trials has relevance to the Christian's pilgrimage:

- Acknowledgement that God ordained him. It is as Jesus told His disciples, the Christian must realise their standing is not of their own doing, : *"Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you"* (John 15:16). And as Paul wrote: *"For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called... that no flesh should glory in his presence. But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption: That, according as it is written, He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord"* (1 Cor. 1:26-31);
- God's selection of Jeremiah did not cause him to be proud nor to trust in his human strength. On the contrary *"he was as a child"*: he recognized that of himself he was powerless;
- God put His words into Jeremiah's mouth. Likewise He puts the words into the Christian's mouth: *"For I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which all your adversaries shall not be able to gainsay nor resist"* (Luke 21:15);
- Jeremiah's ordination imposed servitude: *"Proclaim all these words in the cities of Judah"*. Paul considered himself to be a servant: *"Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated unto the gospel of God"* (Rom. 1:1);
- Just as Jeremiah preached the word that the Lord had given him, so must the Christian *"shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light"*, remembering that *"in time past they were not a people, but are now the people of God"* (1 Pet. 2:9-10), and that it is God who has given them their knowledge.■

PREACH THE WORD: REBUKE

"Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine" (2 Timothy 4:2)

In broad terms, the commission Paul gave to Timothy may be considered to consist of two parts: exhortations to Timothy (to be instant in season and out of season), and instructions regarding the action he was to take regarding others (reprove, rebuke and exhort).

Of all the instructions, perhaps the one to "rebuke" presented the greatest challenge.

The wind

Matthew 8:26 records Jesus rebuking the wind: *"And he saith unto them, Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith? Then he arose, and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a great calm"*, In this verse 'rebuke' is translated from the same Greek word as in 2 Timothy 4:2.

Wind is an inanimate component of the earth and cannot decide of itself when it will blow, from which direction it will blow and at what speed. It is totally under God's control as shown by God used it in the days of Noah: *"And God remembered Noah, and every living thing, and all the cattle that was with him in the ark: and God made a wind to pass over the earth, and the waters asswaged"* (subsided) (Gen. 8:1).

Hence Jesus' rebuke of the wind shows that "rebuke" may have a figurative sense and reference to the context is required to decide the sense in which it is used in each occurrence.

Forbid

The Greek word rendered "rebuke" is also translated as "charge", and may mean to forbid, that is, to direct someone not to do something. Matthew 12:16 is an example of this meaning: *"And charged them that they should not make him known"* This instance does not include any thought of censure or correction; just a prohibition not to do something.

Censure

However "rebuke" may also mean to censure, that is to reprimand or correct. Titus 1:10-11 illustrates this meaning: *"For there are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers, specially they of the circumcision: Whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole houses, teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre's sake"*. Paul directed Titus to "stop the mouths" of those who were subverting whole houses; Paul's direction required Titus to take direct action and censure the offenders.

How

Sadly, there were occasions when Timothy had to censure some in public, making them an example to others: *"Against an elder receive not an accusation, but before two or three witnesses. Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear. I charge thee before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, and the elect angels, that thou observe these things without preferring one before another, doing nothing by partiality"* (1 Tim. 5:19-21). Timothy was to consider two principles before rebuking an elder.

Firstly the misdemeanour had to be substantiated by *"two or three witnesses"*. Nevertheless when the error was substantiated, Timothy was to rebuke them *"before all"*, that is to make them a public spectacle so that others may learn from the error.

Secondly Timothy was to act *"without preferring one before another, doing nothing by partiality"*. That is to say he was not to be influenced by the elder's standing: an error was an error and had to be handled consistently. Such action illustrates the importance and responsibility of elders and their influence on others.

Who

The epistle was Paul's personal letter to Timothy, *"his own son in the faith"* (1 Tim. 1:2), and hence the question may be asked whether such censure action was to be conducted by Timothy only and not by others. If that was the case the responsibility Paul endowed on Timothy was demanding: *"let no man despise thy youth; but be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity"* (1 Tim. 4:12); *"Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee"* (1 Tim. 4:16).■

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