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A BABE IS BORN

“And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:8-11).

The birth of a child is normally a cause of much rejoicing, firstly by the parents and then by all those with whom the parents maintain contact.

There may be several reasons for such rejoicing, some of which are: the newborn child will perpetuate the family name; they will provide social companionship; and, in later years, provide physical support to their aging parents.

Many who rejoice over the birth express their joy by giving gifts.

Indeed the birth of a child is such a joyous event that in many countries the time of the birth is celebrated annually for many years afterwards, commonly referred to as “their birthday”.

Jesus’ birthday

Jesus’ birth was a time for great rejoicing and His birth continues to be celebrated by millions in the world today. Jesus did not request anyone to memorialise His birth, in spite of the fact that if He had not been born there would not be any hope of an “after-life” as is cherished by Christians. Those who are blessed to understand the full significance of His birth rejoice in the prospect of the benefits which His birth will eventually yield, and so His birth may be remembered and celebrated as a wonderful and critical event in the history of mankind.

Gifts

Even though the shepherds did not immediately understand the full significance of the event when they were in the field, by the time they reached Jerusalem they realised it was the birth of the king of the Jews: *“Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there*

*came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, Saying, Where is **he that is born King of the Jews?** for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him... When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, **they presented unto him gifts;** gold, and frankincense, and myrrh” (Matt. 2:1-11).* The practice of giving gifts on every “anniversary” of His birthday (as commonly believed—called “Christmas”), has become a social feature of the Western World, and its commercialisation has resulted in a loss of understanding by the public of its importance.

The date

Down the stream of time there has been much discussion by many learned scholars about the exact time of Jesus’ birth, and differences of opinion still exist regarding the year (as measured by the common Gregorian calendar), the month, the day and the time

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of day. The purpose of this article is not to focus on the precise time of His birth but rather to rejoice in the fact that He was born, and that His birth was the first manifestation of God's plan to rescue mankind from the present experience of suffering and death. (While, prior to Jesus' birth, there had been many manifestations of God's dealing with mankind, including Israel's deliverance from Egypt, none of them directly indicated that His plan provided for Man's redemption from the curse imposed when Adam transgressed in the garden of Eden.)

Parallels

Many parallels (or symbolisms) relating to God's plan have been formulated from the events of Jesus' birth: His earthly parents were on a sojourn; He was born in a manger; His birth was heralded by signs in the heavens; His birth was recognised by only a few; He was brought gifts.

While these parallels are wonderful to meditate upon, there is little Scriptural support which justifies any understanding of God's plan **being based** on them—other Scriptures confirm the truth of many of the pictures that are drawn but the pictures are illustrations and do not comprise a basis for doctrine. For example, some of the pictures (parallels) which have been formulated are: the world of mankind is also on a sojourn, not knowing what awaits them at the end of their journey; they too will rejoice when they recognise that their Saviour has been born; the knowledge of Him does not come through worldly (man-made) circumstances (He was born in a manger and not in a five-star hotel); signs of His birth were given in the heavens and there are signs in the heavens now of the soon establishment of His kingdom; the sign of His birth was given to only a few whom God chose, and so it is today (only a few—God's chosen—are privileged to recognise the signs in the heavens which relate to His return and the establishment of His kingdom).

Comprehension

The "good news" was given to Joseph when he realised Mary was pregnant: "*And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins*" (Matt. 1:21). However the record does not give any indication whether Joseph comprehended the significance of the angel's message (that **the child which his wife would bear would be the Saviour of the whole world**). For all of Joseph's life mankind had suffered the consequences of the sin and corruption inherited from Adam, and so, even though his virgin wife was with child, it might have required an even more dramatic revelation to enable him to fully understand the significance of Mary's pregnancy.

Likewise the shepherds did not fully comprehend the significance of the event when they received the visitation by the heavenly host: "*And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us*" (Luke 2:13-15). It is reasonable to expect that had they appreciated the significance of the message they had just received they would not have expressed the purpose of their visit to Bethlehem merely as to "*see this thing which is come to pass*", but rather that it was the fulfilment of the words of the prophet uttered centuries beforehand: "*Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel*" (Isa. 7:14).

One additional factor which might have shielded the significance of the event, at least in the first instance, was that, although about that time the people of Israel were "*in expectation*" that "**the Christ**" would soon come (Luke 3:2-15), they overlooked the detail of Isaiah's prophecy: "*For unto us **a child is born, unto us a son is given**: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this*" (Isa. 9:6-7).

The Israelites also overlooked God's revelation to Jeremiah: "*Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will perform that good thing which I have promised unto the house of Israel and to the house of Judah. In those days, and at that time, will I cause the Branch of righteousness to grow up unto David; and he shall execute judgment and righteousness in the land... and this is the name wherewith she shall be called, The LORD our righteousness. For thus saith the LORD; David shall never want a man to sit upon the throne of the house of Israel... Thus saith the LORD; If ye can break my covenant of the day, and my covenant of the night, and that there should not be day and night in their season; Then may also **my covenant be broken with David my servant, that he should not have a son to reign upon his throne...***" (Jer. 33:14-22).

Even after His ministry His disciples did not understand the significance of their day, as they as

told “the stranger”: *“But we trusted that it had been he which should have redeemed Israel: and beside all this, to day is the third day since these things were done”* (Luke 24:21).

Later still, after He was raised, the thought of a king who would re-establish Israel’s pre-eminence in the world was still in the forefront of His disciples’ minds: *“When they therefore were come together, they asked of him, saying, Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?”* (Acts 1:6).

Heirship

Many men and women today desire to have children of their own who will perpetuate their family name and inherit their estate—they desire an heir. It was that same desire that motivated Abraham to ask God for a son: *“After these things the word of the LORD came unto Abram in a vision, saying, Fear not, Abram: I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward. And Abram said, Lord GOD, what wilt thou give me, seeing I go childless, and the steward of my house is this Eliezer of Damascus? And Abram said, Behold, to me thou hast given no seed: and, lo, one born in my house is mine heir. And, behold, the word of the LORD came unto him, saying, This shall not be thine heir; but he that shall come forth out of thine own bowels shall be thine heir. And he brought him forth abroad, and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: and he said unto him, So shall thy seed be. And he believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness... 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; And also that nation, whom they shall serve, will I judge: and afterward shall they come out with great substance. And thou shalt go to thy fathers in peace; thou shalt be buried in a good old age”* (Gen. 15:1-15).

Abraham immediately understood that the promise of a reward required him to have an heir, otherwise the promise that he would inherit the land was meaningless—as Stephen declared, he had not personally occupied the promised land: *“And he (Stephen) said, Men, brethren, and fathers, hearken; The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran, And said unto him, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and come into the land which I shall shew thee. Then came he out of the land of the Chaldaeans, and dwelt in Charran: and from thence, when his father was dead, he removed him into this land, wherein ye now dwell. And he gave him none inheritance in it, no, not so much as to set his foot on: yet he promised that he would give*

it to him for a possession, and to his seed after him, when as yet he had no child” (Acts 7:2-5)

Hebrews 11:8-13 testifies that Abraham did not receive the fulfilment of the promise: *“By faith Abraham... he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise... 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”*.

God’s promise to Abraham (that He would give him the land for an everlasting possession) is yet to be fulfilled, however Christians can take great courage from the fact that the latter part of God’s promise to Abraham has been fulfilled—that for a period of 400 years they were strangers in a land that was not theirs (that is, the days of their sojourn in Egypt).

The heathen

Just as the earthly descendant inherits the estate of their father, so also it is with Jesus. God promised Him: *“Ask of me, and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession”* (Psa. 2:8).

At first glance, the promise of the heathen as an inheritance might not seem to be a just reward for all that Jesus did: leaving His heavenly home to come down to earth, being rejected by those to whom He came, and ultimately suffering the ignominy of the cross. However the full import of the promise is hidden in one word—heathen.

The “heathen” includes the whole world of mankind—all the nations. In Strong’s Concordance the Hebrew word translated “heathen” is #1471 and is defined in part as “a foreign nation; hence a Gentile...”. In the King James Version it is variously translated as “Gentile, nation, heathen, people”. The same Hebrew word occurs in Genesis 10 verses 1-5, 20, 31 and 32 where it refers to all the descendants of Noah. Jesus will inherit the whole world of mankind.

The inclusion of the Gentiles in Jesus’ inheritance warrants some emphasis. God chose the descendants of Isaac to be His special people: *“Neither, because they are the seed of Abraham, are they all children: but, In Isaac shall thy seed be called”* (Rom. 9:7). Isaac was a descendant of Abraham who was a descendant of Shem (Gen. 11:10-27). Shem was one of Noah’s three sons (Gen. 10:1). Thus God chose only a small portion of Noah’s descendants to be His special people. God’s choice continued through

Isaac's son, Jacob, who was renamed Israel (Gen. 32:28), and only Jacob (the nation of Israel) was given the privilege of being God's witnesses (Isa. 43:1, 10; Amos 3:2; Rom. 9:4-5).

Saviour

It is possible today to overlook the significance of the angelic messages because the term "saviour" is commonly understood to be saving "believers" from "hell". However, as Matthew declares, His mission was to "*save his people from their sins*" (Matt. 1:21)—that is, His people, not just "believers". A saviour is one who delivers or protects (Strong #4982) and that is precisely why Jesus came to earth—to deliver the people from their sins which they had inherited from father Adam. And not just deliver His people but the whole world of mankind: "*So when the Samaritans were come unto him, they besought him that he would tarry with them: and he abode there two days. And many more believed because of his own word; And said unto the woman, Now we believe, not because of thy saying: for we have heard him ourselves, and know that **this is indeed the Christ, the Saviour of the world***" (John 4:40-42).

The words of the Apostle Paul emphasise the significance of Jesus' role: "*Be not thou therefore ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me his*

*prisoner: but be thou partaker of the afflictions of the gospel according to the power of God; Who hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began, But is now made manifest by the appearing of **our Saviour Jesus Christ, who hath abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel***" (2 Tim. 1:8-10). The thought behind the term "*abolished death*" is that it has been rendered entirely idle (that is, useless—Strong #2673). Jesus is the deliverer of the whole world of mankind from the power of death—the condition which has ruled mankind for several thousand years, which has prevented a person from living forever and which Solomon called a "*sore travail*" (Eccl. 1:13) **What an achievement!**

Mission accomplished

Jesus' mission has not yet been accomplished in that mankind is still subject to the death sentence—they have not been delivered from it. However the time is coming when they will be delivered, as Isaiah declared: "*And it shall be said in that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, and he will save us: this is the LORD; we have waited for him, we will be glad and rejoice in his salvation*" (Isa. 25:9).■

EIGHTEEN PROPHECIES

RELATING TO THE EVENTS WHICH OCCURRED AT THE TIME OF JESUS' FIRST ADVENT

Old Testament	New Testament	Synopsis
Genesis 3:15	Romans 16:20	Seed to bruise
Deuteronomy 18:15	Acts 7:37	A prophet to be raised to Israel
Psalms 22:18	Matthew 27:35, Mark 15:24; Luke 23:34; John 19:24	Casting lots for His vesture
Psalms 118:22-23	Matthew 21:42	Stone to become head of corner
Psalms 118:25-26	Matthew 21:9	Hosanna, son of David
Isaiah 6:9-10	John 12:37-41	Israel's blindness
Isaiah 7:10-15	Matthew 1:18-23	Virgin birth
Isaiah 9:1-2	Matthew 4:13-16	Regions see light
Isaiah 40:3	Matthew 3:1-6; Mark 1:1-3; Luke 3:4	John the Baptist

Old Testament	New Testament	Synopsis
Isaiah 42:1-4	Matthew 12:9-21	Not break a reed
Isaiah 53:1	John 12:38	Arm of the Lord
Isaiah 53:4	Matthew 8:14-17	Healing the sick
Isaiah 61:1-2	Luke 4:16-21	Bind up broken hearted
Jeremiah 31:10-17	Matthew 2:16-18	Slaying of children
Hosea 11:1	Matthew 2:7-15	Out of Egypt
Jonah 1:17	Matthew 12:38-40; 16:4	Jonah
Micah 5:2	Matthew 2:6	Born in Bethlehem
Zechariah 9:9	Matthew 21:5; John 12:12-16	Ass's colt

SOME ASPECTS OF PRAYER

Prayer is one of God's many gifts to His human creation. However He has not given the privilege of prayer to every individual: *"Ye are of God... They are of the world: therefore speak they of the world, and the world heareth them. We are of God: he that knoweth God heareth us; he that is not of God heareth not us..."* (1 John 4:4-6). God does not hear those who are of the world but only those who are "of God".

The blessing of being "of God" was exemplified when multitudes gathered to hear Jesus teach: *"The same day went Jesus out of the house, and sat by the sea side. And great multitudes were gathered together unto him, so that he went into a ship, and sat; and the whole multitude stood on the shore. And he spake many things unto them in parables... And the disciples came, and said unto him, Why speakest thou unto them in parables? He answered and said unto them, Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given... Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand"* (Matt. 13:1-13). Multitudes had gathered and so it seemed to His disciples to be an ideal opportunity for Him to tell them about His mission and the wonderful hope of His kingdom. However, instead of it being an opportunity for Jesus to teach the multitude, the event became a learning experience for His disciples—that it was not God's purpose to enlighten the multitude at that time. Jesus continued: *"But blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear"* (Matt. 13:16). Consequently it behoves the Christian to never forget that any knowledge they have of God's plan is a privilege that God has graciously given them—that is, it is a gift.

Purpose of prayer

Prayer gives the Christian direct access to God: *"After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name..."* (Matt. 6:9). In order to properly avail oneself of the privilege of being able to address God in prayer it is necessary to consider several aspects of prayer.

The basic purpose of prayer is ask God for help and guidance (in the way which He knows will be best for the one making the petition). Thus the most common component of the prayers recorded in the Bible is requests. At first thought that might seem to be self-centred (selfish), but the Model Prayer which Jesus gave His disciples in response to their request to teach them to pray, is comprised largely of requests: a request for the kingdom to come; a request for daily

bread; a request for forgiveness of transgressions; a request to be kept from evil.

And it has always been so. The first record of prayer in the Bible is not a prayer to God but to Sarai: *"Say, I pray thee, thou art my sister: that it may be well with me for thy sake; and my soul shall live because of thee"* (Gen. 12:13). Abram requested (prayed) Sarai to tell the Egyptians that she was his sister. Abram's prayer was a request for her to do something and thus it illustrates one of the primary purposes of prayer—to make a request. Sarai's desire for a child is another example; it was her desire that caused her to pray (request) Abram to go into her handmaid (Gen. 16:2). Other examples include the spies who asked (requested, prayed) the man to show them the entrance to the city of Luz (Judges 1:24), and when the people wished Jesus would leave the area (Mark 5:1-17). Zacharias also made a request when he prayed for a child (Luke 1:5-13).

Even when the Apostle Paul gave thanks to God for the spiritual fruitage of the Ephesians, he added a request: *"Wherefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus, and love unto all the saints, Cease not to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers; That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him: The eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may know what is the hope of his calling, and what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints"* (Eph. 1:15-18).

Another example of a prayerful request is when Paul exhorted the Colossians to continue in prayer with thanksgiving: he asked them to pray that God would open a door of opportunity for him to preach the gospel (Col. 4:1-4). Also, in his letter to the Philadelphians, Paul's exhortation implies that their prayers would contain requests: *"Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God"* (Phil. 4:6).

Even the Christian's prayer for those who are their "enemies" comprises a request: *"But I say unto you, Love your enemies, 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). The Christian's prayer is not that their opposers will increase their opposition but that the persecution will

further develop the Christian's fruits and thus enable them to regard their opposer with pity and understanding, hence the Christian is to pray that all of their experiences will further the development of their fruits of the spirit. A further reason why the Christian's prayer is not for their oppressor to increase their opposition is because any provocation brings a temptation to err, and the Christian is to pray to not be led into temptation: "*And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil*" (Matt. 6:13).

In view of prayer being related to requests, it is appropriate that the manner in which one should pray be addressed.

Privately

Jesus exhorted His disciples to pray privately: "*And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee*" (Matt. 6:5-6). Consequently the first aspect to be highlighted is that personal prayers are to be made in private.

Jesus practised what He preached—He prayed privately: "*And when he had sent the multitudes away, he went up into a mountain apart to pray: and when the evening was come, he was there alone*" (Matt. 14:23). Consequently it is no surprise that, when His hour had come, He prayed alone: "*Then cometh Jesus with them unto a place called Gethsemane, and saith unto the disciples, Sit ye here, while I go and pray yonder. And he took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be sorrowful and very heavy. Then saith he unto them, My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death: tarry ye here, and watch with me. And he went a little further, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt*" (Matt. 26:36-39).

Peter also prayed in private: "*On the morrow, as they went on their journey, and drew nigh unto the city, Peter went up upon the housetop to pray about the sixth hour*" (Acts 10:9).

Not repetitive

Jesus also told His disciples not to use "*vain repetitions*" in their prayers (Matt. 6:7). The precise meaning of "*vain repetitions*" is difficult to determine because Matthew 6:7 is the only place in the Bible where the expression occurs. Dr. Strong

states that the expression contains the thought of "not being a stutterer" (the expression is a combination of two words: #945 and #3361). One characteristic of stuttering is the repetition of a word several times without any thoughts being progressed or developed, and thus it is an apt expression for the Christian to consider and practise.

Jesus gave His disciples two reasons why there is no need to be repetitive: "*your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask Him*" (Matt. 6:8); and that their prayer would not be heard just because of their "*much speaking*" (Matt. 6:7).

The example of the Apostle Paul also gives some guidance regarding repetitive prayer: "*For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me*" (2 Cor. 12:8). The fact that Paul asked three times is worthy of consideration—maybe his repeated prayer was evidence of his sincerity that he believed he could serve the Lord better if it were removed, and also to show that he acknowledged that he was subject to divine authority. However Paul made his request only three times, to which God replied: "*my grace is sufficient for thee*" (2 Cor. 12:9).

In that context it is apparent that the Apostle Paul's exhortation to the brethren at Thessalonica to "*pray without ceasing*" (1 Thess. 5:17) was not an exhortation to repeat their requests often but to keep themselves in an attitude which acknowledged their dependency on God for all their sustenance: "*But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus*" (Phil. 4:19).

One has suggested that repetition in prayer makes it possible to lose sight of the blessings which God has already provided: "*Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone? Or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?*" (Matt. 7:7-11). Jesus used the example of people giving gifts to others—giving things which they believe will be profitable to the recipient—to teach that God provides things that are beneficial for His people, maybe not in the form which they desire, but in the form which He knows is best.

All night

In the context of not being repetitive in prayer, the fact that Jesus prayed all night needs to be

considered: *“And it came to pass in those days, that he went out into a mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God”* (Luke 6:12). The duration of His prayer does not mean that He was repetitive, but rather indicates the number of issues with which He was burdened and the intimacy He enjoyed with His father: *“I and my Father are one”* (John 10:30). The unity of Father and Son is further expressed in John 14:10: *“Believest thou not that I am in the Father, and the Father in me? the words that I speak unto you I speak not of myself: but the Father that dwelleth in me, he doeth the works”*.

The point to note is that a long prayer is not to be empty and repetitive but may be necessary to address all the issues with which the Christian is confronted: *“Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye devour widows’ houses, and for a pretence make long prayer: therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation”* (Greek: *krima*—decision) (Matt. 23:14). The Pharisees erred, not because of the duration of their prayer, but because their motive in making the prayer long was *“a pretence”* (an outward showing). The Christian who is one with their Lord will also have a desire to share with Him every detail of their lives, to listen to His response, and consequently will desire to spend extended periods in prayer (in private).

Content

The first element of the Model Prayer is acknowledgement of God’s sovereignty: *“Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name...”*. The acknowledgement of His supreme position and power brings the heart into a submissive and respectful attitude. David was an example: *“Bless the LORD, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless his holy name. Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits: Who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy diseases; Who redeemeth thy life from destruction; who crowneth thee with loving kindness and tender mercies; Who satisfieth thy mouth with good things; so that thy youth is renewed like the eagle’s”* (Psa. 103:1-5). And again: *“Bless the LORD’S name; shew forth his salvation from day to day. Declare his glory among the heathen, his wonders among all people. For the LORD is great, and greatly to be praised: Give unto the LORD the glory due unto his name”* (Psa. 96:2-9). The first element of a Christian’s prayer should be an acknowledgement of the status of the One to whom they are praying—*“which art in heaven, hallowed (sanctified; set apart) be thy name”* (Matt. 6:9).

Thanksgiving

Acknowledgement of His sovereignty leads to expressions of thankfulness because such

acknowledgement recognises that He is the giver of every good and perfect gift: *“Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning”* (James 1:17). *“Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving, and make a joyful noise unto him with psalms. For the LORD is a great God, and a great King above all gods. In his hand are the deep places of the earth: the strength of the hills is his also. The sea is his, and he made it: and his hands formed the dry land. O come, let us worship and bow down: let us kneel before the LORD our maker. For he is our God; and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand...”* (Psa. 95:2-7).

Self examination

Prayer should cause the Christian to examine himself, and to pray for forgiveness where they have come short: *“If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness”* (1 John 1:8-9). The confession of sins relates directly to prayer.

Prayer should not be general but specific and it is when specific instances of falling short are articulated that their significance is fully realised. A Christian grows best when they realise their short-comings—such realization strengthens their resolve to avoid the same pitfalls in the future.

Another element which the Christian can take to God in prayer is secret faults—errors and shortcomings of which they are not aware. Again the words of David provide good counsel: *“Who can understand (discern; distinguish) his errors? Cleanse thou me from secret faults. Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous (proud, arrogant) sins; let them not have dominion over me: then shall I be upright, and I shall be innocent from the great transgression”* (Psa. 19:12-13). The Christian is to not only make every effort to discern their errors, but to recognize that it is a difficult thing to see all of their own faults, and hence they are to pray that God will bring them to their notice—things which have escaped their self examination: *“Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves...”* (2 Cor. 13:5).

Petitions

The Christian’s life is one of trial and sacrifice, so to pray for God to remove all trials would possibly be contrary to their eternal good. Consequently the appropriate course regarding making petition to God is that He will direct the issue and give His grace and strength so that the Christian will be able to endure whatever experiences He is permitting them to bear.

It is in that context that Jesus told His disciples: *“And whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If ye shall ask any thing in my name, I will do it”* (John 14:14). John 15:7 adds: *“If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you”*. The Christian’s prayer must always be that God will provide those things which will best yield the fruits of righteousness: *“And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment; That ye may approve things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere and without offence till the day of Christ; Being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God”* (Phil. 1:9-11).

Prayers for others

James 5:16 reads: *“Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much”*. The clause *“the prayer of a righteous man availeth much”* does not mean that God’s benevolence towards a Christian is dependent

on the prayers of another—that would mean that one’s failure to pray for any particular individual would result in the individual being deprived of God’s blessing. Rather the lesson is that the church is to be one: *“Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one”* (John 17:20-22). The Lord knows far better than any human being what is needed for each individual’s welfare. The reason God wants Christians to pray for others is to help them understand that He wants them to be to one another what He has been to them; in love, forgiveness, and unlimited concern. He wants them to have the oneness for which Jesus prayed.

Thus it is appropriate that the Christian’s prayer concludes with the heartfelt words which Jesus uttered in His darkest hour: *“nevertheless not my will but thine be done”* (Luke 22:42).■

PAUL AND TIMOTHY

It is possible that the Apostle Paul’s second letter to Timothy was the last one he wrote; it is certainly the last letter recorded.

At the time of writing he knew that death was imminent. His whole life since his miraculous conversion had been given to preaching the gospel. He had faced death many times: beaten with the lash and with rods, stoned until he was reckoned dead (Acts 14:19), ship-wrecked and persecuted by several methods by merciless enemies (2 Cor. 11:24-27). He had been delivered repeatedly by Divine intervention (2 Tim. 3:11), but now he knew he was not going to be delivered any more; not that the very moment of death had come when he wrote, but it was growing nearer. The time of his departure from the present life was at hand (2 Tim. 4:6). There was no more a realization that his life would be preserved for future service as he had earlier expressed to the Philippian brethren (Phil. 1:24-25). The present services were the last he would be privileged to minister in the flesh. He was not resisting; he would bind the sacrifice to the altar to the very last for the God who had shown him the light (Psa. 118:27).

He had fought a good fight (2 Tim. 4:7), and what a fight it had been—against many such as Alexander the coppersmith who had done him *“much evil”* (2 Tim. 4:14). The great archenemy had been the Devil himself. He had met the apostle at every turn with

the ferocity of a roaring lion. But the apostle never flinched, he submitted himself to God fully, and resisted the Devil till he cowered from the scene as James also exhorted the brethren: *“Resist the devil, and he will flee from you”* (James 4:7).

Christ had been Paul’s strength, and Paul had learned how he could do all things through Him (Phil. 4:13). He had finished his course; none of these things had caused him to abandon the ministry he had received from the Lord Jesus; bonds and affliction had been largely his lot, but he saw them as only momentary and he was finishing his course with joy (2 Cor. 4:17; Acts 20:24) (The concept of “course” embraces not only the thought of a race but also of “a career, a training course for an occupation”—Vines Dictionary.)

The “course” had been demanding. He started from a position of chief of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15) and he was reminded time and again within himself of his shortcomings. That for which he had been apprehended by Christ Jesus was hard of attainment, but he did not allow himself to become discouraged; he had pressed on toward the mark for the prize that was offered to him (Phil. 3:12-14). Now the course of training was complete, he had “graduated” and he could look forward to the crown of righteousness which the Lord, the righteous judge, would give him in due time.■

THE CLOUDS OF HEAVEN

Genesis 1:7 reads: “*Thus God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament; and it was so*”. God separated the water in earth’s environment into two realms; one above the firmament and one below the firmament (the firmament is the “visible arch of the sky”—Strong’s Concordance #7549). However there is no mention of clouds in the account of creation.

Clouds are the visible evidence of water in the atmosphere, and are the source of rain. Consistent with the absence of clouds there was no rain at that time, the earth was watered by a mist which went up from the ground: “*This is the history of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, before any plant of the field was in the earth and before any herb of the field had grown. For the LORD God had not caused it to rain on the earth, and there was no man to till the ground; but a mist went up from the earth and watered the whole face of the ground*” (Gen. 2:4-6 NKJV).

Clouds and rain

The first mention of rain occurs in the account of the flood of Noah’s day: “*And it came to pass after seven days that the waters of the flood were on the earth. In the six hundredth year of Noah’s life, in the second month, the seventeenth day of the month, on that day all the fountains of the great deep were broken up, and the windows of heaven were opened. And the rain was on the earth forty days and forty nights...*” (Gen. 7:10-12).

The first mention of clouds is shortly after the flood; after it had rained: “*I set My rainbow in the cloud, and it shall be for the sign of the covenant between Me and the earth. It shall be, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the rainbow shall be seen in the cloud*” (Gen. 9:13-14).

The presence of clouds does not necessarily mean it is going to rain. In response to one of Bildad’s taunts Job answered: “*He (God) binds up the water in His thick clouds, Yet the clouds are not broken under it*” (Job 26:8). The thrust of Job’s reply was to defend God’s supremacy, and the example of the clouds binding up water was a powerful argument—God can bind up the water in the clouds (that is, withhold rain), and the example of the huge weight of water which the clouds can withhold (several million tonnes), the existence of clouds without rain falling is a graphic example of God’s power.

Formation of clouds

Clouds and their associated phenomena may be spectacular—the miracle of the rainbow intrigues many people, old and young alike. Especially in the tropics the formation of clouds can be spectacular, and God has used the formation of clouds, as well their existence, as a sign to His people.

The *International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* describes the weather patterns in Palestine, an understanding of which enhances the significance of the references to clouds in the Scriptures: “*The weather in Palestine is more even and has less variety than that in other lands. It is a long, narrow country with sea on the West and desert on the East. The wind coming from the West is always moist and brings clouds with it. If the temperature over the land is low enough the clouds will be condensed and rain will fall, but if the temperature is high, as in the five months of summer, there can be no rain even though clouds are seen. As a whole the winter is cloudy and the summer clear...The clouds are depicted in two distinct ways: in the autumn rain storms often arise suddenly from the sea, and what seems to be a mere haze, “as small as a man’s hand”, (such as Gehazi saw—2 Kings 4:12; 1 Kings 18:44) over the sea, within a few hours becomes the black storm cloud pouring down torrents of rain (1 Kings 18:45). Fog is almost unknown and there is very seldom an overcast, gloomy day. The west and southwest winds bring rain (Luke 12:54). In the months of April, May and September a hot east wind sometimes rises from the desert and brings with it a cloud of dust which fills the air and penetrates everything. In the summer afternoons, especially in the month of August, on the seacoast there is apt to blow up from the south a considerable number of low cirrostratus clouds which seem to fill the air with dampness, making more oppressive the dead heat of summer. These are doubtless the detested “clouds without water” mentioned in Jude verse 12, and “heat by the shade of a cloud” (Isa. 25:5)*”.

God used the formation of the little cloud over the sea to inform Elijah when to send his servant Gehazi to Ahab. God’s use of the cloud indicates that Elijah was aware of the formation of the cloud and that God would use the cloud to tell him when to send Gehazi. The significance of the cloud is emphasised by the fact that it did not form until Gehazi’s seventh visit.

God’s domain

Clouds are used in some visions to refer to God’s dwelling place: “*He lays the beams of His upper*

chambers in the waters, Who makes the clouds His chariot, Who walks on the wings of the wind, He waters the hills from His upper chambers; The earth is satisfied with the fruit of Your works” (Psalm 104:3, 13). In similar vein the prophet Nahum wrote: “The LORD is slow to anger and great in power, And will not at all acquit the wicked. The LORD has His way in the whirlwind and in the storm, And the clouds are the dust of His feet. He rebukes the sea and makes it dry, And dries up all the rivers. Bashan and Carmel wither, And the flower of Lebanon wilts. The mountains quake before Him, The hills melt, And the earth heaves at His presence, Yes, the world and all who dwell in it. (Nahum 1:3-5).

The Psalmist also referred to the clouds to establish God’s status as ruler of the universe: *“Who (God) covers the heavens with clouds, Who prepares rain for the earth, Who makes grass to grow on the mountains” (Psalm 147:8). And again: “Whatever the LORD pleases He does, in heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deep places. He causes the vapours to ascend from the ends of the earth; He makes lightning for the rain; He brings the wind out of His treasures” (Psalm 135:6-7).*

Job also marvelled how the clouds manifest God’s **manifold power**: *“By the breath of God ice is given, and the broad waters are frozen. Also with moisture He saturates the thick clouds; He scatters His bright clouds. And they swirl about, being turned by His guidance, that they may do whatever He commands them on the face of the whole earth” (Job 37:10-12).*

Man’s inferiority

Clouds are also used to show the limited knowledge and power of Man. Job 38:37 reads: *“Who can number the clouds by wisdom?”*. Such was Job’s admiration of God’s power as exemplified in the clouds that he also wrote: *“Indeed, can anyone understand the spreading of clouds...” (Job 36:29); and, “Can you lift up your voice to the clouds, That an abundance of water may cover you?” (Job 38:34).* The implication is that no man can do any of those things—they are exclusively God’s domain.

Even the marvellous scientific developments during the last 100 years do not enable scientists to control the clouds. Several years ago spreading silver iodide and dry ice in clouds (“cloud seeding”) was carried out in the hope of producing rain and thereby overcoming the devastating effects of drought. However God remains the One who sends rain, both on *“the just and the unjust” (Matt. 5:45).*

Transient clouds

The difference in temperature between day and night

in Palestine results in some clouds existing for only a short time. The clouds formed by breezes from the Mediterranean Sea are often completely evaporated shortly after they reach land. This natural phenomenon, together with the morning dew which also quickly evaporates in the morning sun, is used by Hosea as an illustration of the transitory state of the faith of Ephraim and Judea: *“...your faithfulness is like a morning cloud, and like the early dew it goes away” (Hosea 6:4).* Job also referred to the transitory nature of some clouds to say that his prosperity was *“...like that of a passing cloud”*. (Job 30:15).

Presence of God

Clouds have indicated God’s presence. During the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt *“...the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so as to go by day and night. He did not take away the pillar of cloud by day or the pillar of fire by night from before the people” (Exodus 13:21-22).*

The cloud also assured the Israelites that God was with them and was protecting them when they were assailed by the Egyptians: *“So it came between the camp of the Egyptians and the camp of Israel. Thus it was a cloud and darkness to the one, and it gave light by night to the other, so that the one did not come near the other all that night” (Exodus 14:20).*

A cloud was also used in the tabernacle to indicate God’s presence: *“Then the cloud covered the tabernacle of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle... Whenever the cloud was taken up from above the tabernacle, the children of Israel would go onward in all their journeys. But if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not journey till the day that it was taken up. For the cloud of the LORD was above the tabernacle by day, and fire was over it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel, throughout all their journeys” (Exodus 40:34-38).*

False teachers

The Apostle Peter uses the fact that not all clouds yield life-giving rain to describe false teachers: *“...there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them...These are wells without water, clouds carried by a tempest, for whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever” (2 Pet.: 2:1, 17).* Similarly Jude refers to dust clouds: *“These are spots in your love feasts, while they feast with you without fear, serving only themselves. They are clouds without water, carried about by the winds; late autumn trees without fruit, twice dead, pulled up by the roots” (Jude 12).* In both texts water is used to represent the gospel (John 4:14).

Clouds in Prophecy

Clouds occur in many of the visions and prophecies recorded in the Bible. One such vision is recorded in Ezekiel 1:1-4: “...the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God...the word of the LORD came expressly to Ezekiel the priest...Then I looked, and behold, a whirlwind was coming out of the north, a great cloud with raging fire engulfing itself; and brightness was all around it and radiating out of its midst like the color of amber, out of the midst of the fire”. The cloud pictured in Ezekiel’s vision was not a cloud of water (because it was engulfed by fire) but maybe a cloud of dust or a “fireball”.

Clouds also are part of Daniel’s vision of the time of the end: “I was watching in the night visions, And behold, One like the Son of Man, Coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days, And they brought Him near before Him. Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, That all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, Which shall not pass away, And His kingdom the one Which shall not be destroyed” (Dan. 7:13-14). The statement that the clouds were “of heaven” implies they were of Divine origin.

Jesus also used clouds in His explanation of the events at the end of the age: “Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken... Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (Matt. 24:29-30). In this description clouds are both an instrument to obscure the sun and a sign of His return.

The concept of Christ returning in the clouds of heaven reflect the message of the angel at His ascension: “Now when He had spoken these things, while they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel, who also said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven” (Acts 1:9-11).

Revelation 14:14-16 also uses the symbolism of clouds to describe His return: “Then I looked, and behold, a white cloud, and on the cloud sat One like the Son of Man, having on His head a golden crown, and in His hand a sharp sickle. And another angel

came out of the temple, crying with a loud voice to Him who sat on the cloud, “Thrust in Your sickle and reap, for the time has come for You to reap, for the harvest of the earth is ripe.” So He who sat on the cloud thrust in His sickle on the earth, and the earth was reaped”.

Clouds are also used to describe the resurrection of the saints: “Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air...” (1 Thess. 4:17).

Interpretation in prophecy

In view of the various ways in which clouds are used in the Scriptures, the meaning to be attached to their use in any prophecy might be difficult to determine. For example, the statement in Revelation 14 that He sat on the clouds may be interpreted to mean that He will not be visible to those on earth—those “below”. Some justification for that interpretation may be derived from Psalm 18:9-14: “He bowed the heavens also, and came down. With darkness under His feet. And He rode upon a cherub, and flew; He flew upon the wings of the wind. **He made darkness His secret place; His canopy around Him was dark waters. And thick clouds of the skies.** From the brightness before Him, His **thick clouds** passed with hailstones and coals of fire. The LORD thundered from heaven, And the Most High uttered His voice, Hailstones and coals of fire. He sent out His arrows and scattered the foe, Lightnings in abundance, and He vanquished them”. However, in these verse in Psalms, the clouds may be interpreted as the source of hailstones.

Clouds are also used to symbolise turmoil: “For the day is near, even the day of the LORD is near; It will be **a day of clouds**, the time of the Gentiles” (Ezekiel 30:3). The prophet Zephaniah also uses clouds to portray turmoil: “The great day of the LORD is near; it is near and hastens quickly. The noise of the day of the LORD is bitter; there the mighty men shall cry out. That day is a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of devastation and desolation, a day of darkness and gloominess, **a day of clouds and thick darkness**, a day of trumpet and alarm against the fortified cities and against the high towers. ‘I will bring distress upon men, and they shall walk like blind men, because they have sinned against the LORD; their blood shall be poured out like dust, and their flesh like refuse.’ Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them in the day of the Lord’s wrath...” (Zeph. 1:14-18).

Summary

Clouds are used to convey several different concepts and the lesson to be derived from any instance must take into account the context of the occurrence.■

LOVE ENDURES ALL THINGS

Endurance is one of the sixteen characteristics of love listed in 1 Corinthians 13: “*love endures all things*” (1 Cor. 13:7). Several aspects of endurance warrant consideration.

Source

The Christian is to endure all things, regardless of the source of the affliction—whether it be family, friends, the world or brethren. Jesus told His disciples: “*Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves. But beware of men, for they will deliver you up to councils and scourge you in their synagogues. You will be brought before governors and kings for My sake... brother will deliver up brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death. And you will be hated by all for My name's sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved*” (Matt. 10:16-22). Jesus told His disciples that testing would come from various sources and they would require wisdom to endure (withstand) it.

Not for one's own faults

The challenge for the Christian is to endure everything **for His sake** and not because of any misdemeanour by the Christian. The Apostle Peter distinguishes the two: “*For this is thankworthy, if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully. For what glory is it, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? but if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God. For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps*” (1 Peter 2:19-21). Even though he was addressing women in particular, it was in similar vein that Paul wrote to Titus that their conduct was to be such “*that the word of God be not blasphemed*” (Titus 2:5).

Opposition is easier to endure when it is remembered that it is a “natural consequence of the truth”: “*For I have come to set a man against his father...a man's enemies shall be those of his own household. He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me*” (Matt. 10:35-37). The reason for the antagonism is that the Christian is walking in the light whereas the world is in darkness (Eph. 5:8), and men love darkness rather than light (John 3:19).

Duration

Severe affliction may be tolerated if it is of short duration, however the requirement for the Christian is

to sustain their love “*until the end*”. The Christian's love is not to wane because the trial continues for a prolonged period. The zeal of their first love must be sustained: “*But call to remembrance the former days, in which, after ye were illuminated, ye endured a great fight of afflictions*” (Heb. 10:32).

Jesus repeated the need to endure to the end when He told His disciples about the signs of His return: “*Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted... and ye shall be hated of all nations for my name's sake. And then shall many be offended, and shall betray one another, and shall hate one another. And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold. But he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved*” (Matt. 24:9-13). Perhaps there is a special lesson for those living at the time of His return.

Love for brethren

Another aspect of a Christian's endurance is forbearing for the sake of their brethren. Paul told Timothy: “*...I suffer trouble, as an evil doer, even unto bonds... I endure all things for the elect's sakes, that they may also obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory*” (2 Tim. 2:9-10). Paul endured, even to the point of suffering “*as an evil doer*”, so that others would be victorious. His endurance exemplified the primary concept of endurance—“staying under” (Strong #5278)—that is, he suppressed his own preferences and suffered wrongfully so that they would not be discouraged by his affliction. Such an action exemplifies love enduring all things.

The hope of reigning

There is a reward for those who endure: “*If we suffer we shall also reign with him...*” (2 Tim. 2:12). In this verse “suffer” (Strong #5278) means “to endure”, and thus the lesson is that it is to those who endure to the end—those who suffer for the Lord and for their brethren, but not for themselves—that the promise of reigning with Him is held out: “*to live and reign with Him for a thousand years*”. (Rev. 20:4).■

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