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GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY

For more than twenty centuries Christians have remembered the birth of Jesus and given thanks to the Almighty Ruler of the universe because "*In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God has sent His only-begotten Son into the world*" (1 John 4:9). "*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, ... that the world through him might be saved ...*" (John 3:16-17). Jesus' birth, combined with His death and resurrection, are the most important events in the world's history. In the words of the hymn, "*The whole world was lost in the darkness of sin, The light of the world is Jesus*".

The celebration of Christmas has been instituted by Man and involves all of the traditions that we see today in the Western world. This much commercialized celebration is recognised by most of our society; unbelievers, pagans and Christians alike. Although December is not now generally accepted as the time of Jesus' birth, nevertheless we can still, with thankful hearts, remember and celebrate the greatest birthday of all time. It is for each individual to decide how they regard this "holiday", and how they will use the time, for we do not have specific instructions from God concerning the observance of Christ's birth as we do for "the Memorial" – the remembrance of His death.

The power of God was displayed when His appointed time came for our Lord to leave the Heavenly realm and come to Earth to be born as a human being, and ultimately to be a corresponding ransom price for Adam and his posterity. Jesus came at the time God had pre-arranged: "...when the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son ..." (Gal. 4:4). His coming was not a 'rescue mission' in the sense of being added by God after Adam and Eve transgressed. On the contrary, His coming and sacrifice were part of God's plan from the beginning of time, as the Scripture declares - Jesus was "*the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world*" (Rev. 13:8).

Purpose foreknown

The significance of Jesus' birth is not yet realised by the majority of the human race but that does not detract from its importance. Jesus knew from the outset

why He had come to Earth. He was only 12 years of age when He stayed behind in the temple after the feast, and was found asking "the doctors" questions. When His parents found Him, it is recorded that "*He said to them, ... 'Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?'*" (Luke 2:42-50). At first glance these verses might seem to be saying that He needed to ask questions about the purpose of His coming, but verses 47 and 50 show that He was more knowledgeable than those to whom He spoke: "*And all that heard him were astonished at his understanding and answers. And they understood not the saying which he spake unto them*". Jesus knew from the start of His earthly life why God had sent Him to Earth as He told His disciples: "*Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many*" (Matt. 20:28).

Foretold in the prophecies

The prophecies of the birth of our Redeemer run like a golden thread through every book of the Old Testament. Isaiah 7:14 is one such prophecy: "*Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel*". The angel of the Lord confirmed to Joseph that this prophecy referred to Jesus (Matt. 1:18-25).

The prophet Micah also was used by God to foretell Jesus' birth, naming the place of His birth: "*But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting*" (Micah 5:2). This prophecy was understood by the chief

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priests and scribes as stated in Matthew 2:5 - 6.

The birth of Jesus marked the beginning of the fulfilment of many prophecies that had been uttered during the previous 4000 years. It was because the Old Testament contained so many predictions by the prophets concerning the coming Messiah, that about the time of our Saviour's birth "*the people were in expectation*" of Him (Luke 3:15).

The Advent of the Messiah to deliver and restore them to Palestine was the common hope of the Jews and that hope was never stronger than at that time. Daniel's prophecy in chapter 9 verses 24-25 did not say much about the glorious kingdom that they anticipated from other prophecies, but it fixed the time of the Messiah's advent: "*Seventy weeks are determined upon thy people and upon thy holy city, to finish the transgression, and to make an end of sins, and to make reconciliation for iniquity, and to bring in everlasting righteousness, and to seal up the vision and prophecy, and to anoint the Most Holy. Know therefore and understand, that from the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem unto the Messiah the Prince shall be seven weeks, and threescore and two weeks ...*

. It is possible that the "seventy weeks prophecy" would have been an important topic of study and discussion for many generations of faithful Jews, and may well have been one factor that caused them to be in "*expectation*" as they earnestly looked for their Messiah. God also moved some devout peoples' hearts in readiness for that day as He did with Simeon and Anna (Luke 2:25-39).

The announcement of His birth

In fulfilment of definite proclamations and promises going back to the Garden of Eden, the event came of the One whose birth was heralded by Angels. Their message was: "*Behold, I bring you good news of great joy which shall be for all the people. For today in the city of David there has been born for you a Saviour which is Christ the Lord*" (Luke 2:10-11).

It is significant that this message of such far-reaching importance was first given to humble shepherds looking after their sheep by night. The message was not given to the religious leaders – the Scribes or Pharisees - but to those lowly ones whose hearts were in the right condition to receive it with reverence and awe. The account in Luke 1:26 of the angel Gabriel telling Mary that she was specially chosen by God to give birth to God's Son shows Mary's humility and faith by her song of praise to God for His grace in selecting her – "*For the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is His name*" (Luke 1:49).

From Jesus' humble birth in a manger to His simple

upbringing and His ministry after His baptism, it is evident that the character of our Saviour was one of selflessness and complete obedience to the Father's will. Jesus said "*Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you shall find rest for your souls*" (Matt. 11:29). It is striking to note that when our Lord selected His disciples, most of them were not from the higher educated or rich, but from humble occupations.

The proclamation of the angels to those humble shepherds that a king was born that night in Judea in fulfilment of many prophecies holds the deepest significance for everyone who has ever lived. A mighty kingdom of power and light was promised to replace the empire of evil and darkness presided over by Satan, "*the god of this world*". Yes, there is an empire of evil, there is a dominion of darkness and ungodliness that must and will be broken.

The future

Long centuries have passed into history since the good tidings were first given to the shepherds about the new-born Prince of Peace. At this coming season millions of Christians will celebrate the birth of Jesus and proclaim this wonderful message of "*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill towards men*". Yet the world continues in turmoil, anguish and distress and there is no peace. However this will not continue forever, for the promises of God are sure and the earth will yet see this kingdom of peace and righteousness as declared by the prophet Isaiah (chap. 9:6 - 7):

"For a child will be born to us, a Son will be given us; And the government will rest on his shoulders; And His name will be Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. There will be no end to the increase of His government of peace, On the throne of David and over his kingdom, To establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness; From then on and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will accomplish this".

Looking down the stream of time, the prophet Isaiah saw the fulfilment of all that was promised; from a manger to a throne, from a world that had no house for the Prince of Peace to be born in to a world filled with the glory of His presence and righteous rule.

A blessed hope is this Christmas hope – first in this gospel age for the Church, and in the age to come for the world. This good news of great joy is for all people – for Jews and Gentiles, for Kings and Shepherds, for rich and poor. How blessed mankind will be when during that time they will be brought back into harmony with God through a righteous King who was once born a baby in Bethlehem.

THE RECONCILIATION OF THE WORLD

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth... Let the earth bring forth grass... the herb... and the fruit tree ...Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs and seasons...Let the waters abound with an abundance of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth ...Let the earth bring forth the living creature ...cattle and creeping thing and beast of the earth,...And God saw that it was good" (Gen. 1:1-25 NKJV).

Each stage of creation from day three to day five was completed with the words *"And God saw that it was good"*. How wonderful it would have been to have seen the earth in all its glory at that time when it was prepared to receive God's ultimate earthly creation, mankind, as recorded in Gen. 1:26: *"Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth"* (NKJV).

This ultimate earthly creation was given God's blessing with the words *"Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth...I have given you every herb that yields seed which is on the face of all the earth, and every tree whose fruit yields seed; to you it shall be for food. Also, to every beast of the earth, to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, in which there is life, I have given every green herb for food"* (Gen. 1:28-30 NKJV). All of God's creation for the earth was now in place, everything was now complete, as expressed by the words *"Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good..."* (Gen. 1:31 NKJV).

How things have changed from when mankind was first given dominion over this wonderful earth:

- In January 2006, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization warned that 11 million people in Somalia, Kenya, Djibouti and Ethiopia were in danger of starvation due to the combination of severe drought and military conflicts. In 2006, the most serious humanitarian crisis in Africa was in Sudan's region Darfur.
- *"By 2025, two-thirds of arable land in Africa will disappear, along with a third of Asia and a fifth of South America. Some 135 million people - equivalent to the populations of France and Germany combined - are at risk of being displaced. One-third of the Earth's surface is at risk, driving people into cities and destroying agriculture in vast*

swathes of Africa. Thirty-one percent of Spain is threatened, while China has lost 36,000 square miles to desert — an area the size of Indiana — since the 1950s" (Michel Smitall, a spokesman for the U.N. secretariat).

- *"More than 80 percent of the Earth's natural forests already have been destroyed. Up to 90 percent of West Africa's coastal rain forests have disappeared since 1900. Brazil and Indonesia, which contain the world's two largest surviving regions of rain forest, are being stripped at an alarming rate by logging, fires, and land-clearing for agriculture and cattle-grazing" (World Resources Institute).*
- It is estimated that about 125 species of birds and 60 species of mammals have become extinct since A.D. 1600. Currently, there are approximately 1000 species of birds and mammals that are facing extinction.

What has brought about this catastrophic change on the earth, from one specially designed to be inhabited and to sustain and multiply human, animal and plant life, to an earth which is rapidly turning into deserts, where the land is being denuded as the forests are destroyed, plants and animals are rapidly becoming extinct, and where the very existence of the human race is coming under threat by famines and wars?

The present situation was initiated when Adam and Eve disobeyed God's instruction *"...of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die"* (Gen. 2:16-17 NKJV).

As a result of their disobedience God proclaimed *"Cursed is the ground for your sake; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, and you shall eat the herb of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for dust you are, And to dust you shall return"* Gen. 3:17-19 NKJV).

It is not only Adam who has fallen from perfection but, as the Apostle Paul explains, *"...all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God"* (Rom. 3:23 NKJV). This wonderful earth, created for the enjoyment of mankind, now cursed, Man no longer has dominion over it - He eventually returns to the earth as dust; the death sentence has been invoked. Disobedience of God's law, plus the curse put on the earth as a result of Adam's disobedience, has resulted in the near destruction of the planet and all life on it.

What hope is there for this fallen race and this troubled earth? How can mankind be forgiven and brought back into harmony with God?

Redemption

Mankind needed to be redeemed, that is, that which was lost through disobedience to God's law had to be bought back from the Evil One. God has provided that the price could be a ransom, that is, one payment made on behalf of all mankind. However the ransom price was a perfect human life, and that was something that no ordinary man could pay because "*through one man (Adam) sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned.*" (Rom. 5:12 NKJV). Consequently Psalm 49:7 reads: "*none of them can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him*" (Psa. 49:7 NKJV). The problem remained: a ransom was required that was not tainted with sin, and that excluded all of Adam's descendants.

Provision of the Ransom

The ransom was provided by God himself: "*For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved*" (John 3:16-17). God provided the ransom price through His son, who willingly "*gave his life a ransom*". (Matt. 20:28). The ransom price required the shedding of blood because under God's law, "*without shedding of blood there is no remission*" (Heb. 9:22 NKJV).

A ransom does not merely achieve a gratuitous release of the captive, but **it pays** for the captive's release. The ransom price (Greek "*lutron*") for the fallen human race was the life of Christ, his blood, his death: "*... you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, ... but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot... who was foreordained before the foundation of the world*" (1 Peter 1:18-20 NKJV).

Propitiation

As a result of Christ's death the world's sins have been atoned. The word used in the Scriptures to refer to Christ as Mankind's ransom price is "*propitiation*": "*being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus*" (Rom. 3:23-26 NKJV). The man Christ Jesus was the ransom!

Through God's grace, everyone since Jesus' coming

to Earth, who believes that Jesus is their "*propitiation*" is delivered from justly deserved wrath. It is important to note that God's justice has not changed; He graciously counts Jesus' death on the Cross as their propitiation and hence He is able to forgive them. By giving up His sinless life sacrificially, Christ annulled the power of sin to separate God and the believer. In other words, the believer is reconciled to God.

Reconciliation

2 Corinthians 5:18-19 shows that there are two stages in God's plan for individuals to be reconciled to Him: "*... God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them...*" (NKJV). The first stage began with the apostles at the start of the Gospel age and the second stage will not end until the whole world has been reconciled to Him.

It is man who needs to be reconciled to God, and not God to man. God has not changed; He is immutable (that is, unchangeable - Heb. 6:17). Nevertheless it is God who has provided the means of Man's reconciliation to Him: "*God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us...For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. And not only that, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation*" (Rom. 5:8-11 NKJV).

At the beginning of the Gospel Age, God offered the opportunity to be reconciled to Him only to the Jewish nation. It was not until they, as a nation, rejected the opportunity that God offered it to the Gentiles, Cornelius and his family being the first Gentiles to be baptized by the Apostle Peter (Acts 10:1-48). The opportunity to be reconciled to God spread to all the Gentiles in the region as recorded in Ephesians 2:11-19: "*Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh - who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands - that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ... Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God...*" (NKJV).

The calling out of the Gentiles to be "a people for His name" (Acts 15:14 NKJV) does not mean that the Jews have been cast off with no opportunity ever to be

reconciled to God. Paul declares: “*Has God cast away His people? Certainly not!... God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew...*” (Rom. 11:1-2).

The Jewish nation previously obtained favour with God to some extent through the law and the yearly atonement day sacrifices. However they could not keep the Law in its entirety because of the weaknesses of their flesh: “*For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh*” (Rom 8:3). Also the benefits afforded by these sacrifices ended when Christ fulfilled the law at his death: “*having cancelled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross*” (Col. 2:14 NIV).

Paul continues to explain the wonder of God’s plan for the Jewish nation: “*...Israel has not obtained what it seeks; but the elect have obtained it, and the rest were blinded. Just as it is written: ‘God has given them a spirit of stupor, Eyes that they should not see and ears that they should not hear, to this very day’.have they stumbled that they should fall? Certainly not! But through their fall, to provoke them to jealousy, salvation has come to the Gentiles...for if their being cast away is the reconciling of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?*”. Paul then warns the Gentiles “*... do not boast against the branches, ...but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, He may not spare you either*” (Rom. 11: 7-20 NKJV).

The reconciliation process for mankind will not be completed in this Gospel Age, as Paul reminds Timothy: “*God our Savior, ...desires all men to be saved and to come to 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 2:3-6 NKJV). The fact that the ransom is to be testified “in due time” implies that it is not yet fully testified; the time of its full testimony will be during the Millennial reign of Christ when many of the Old Testament prophesies will come to fruition. Both the prophets Habakkuk and Isaiah write of that time: “*...the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.*” (Hab. 2:14). “*They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea*” (Isa. 11:9).

Prior to this situation being established, Satan will be bound. During this Gospel age Satan “*...has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ ...*” (2 Cor. 4:4-5 NIV). However when Satan is bound, mankind will come to realise their enmity with God and their

undone condition. Nevertheless, even with Satan bound, it will take a period of time for the prophecy to be fulfilled: “*A highway shall be there, and a road and it shall be called the Highway of Holiness. The unclean shall not pass over it, But the redeemed shall walk there, and the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing, with everlasting joy on their heads*” (Isa. 35:8-10 NKJV).

As the hearts of mankind change, the Earth will be restored to that of the Garden of Eden. Mankind will have dominion over the animals, the curse will be lifted from the Earth and the promises recorded in Isaiah will come into being: “*The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young ones shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox...They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain*” (Isa. 11:6-9 NKJV). The restoration of the Earth is also foretold in Isaiah 35: “*The wilderness and the wasteland shall be glad for them, And the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose ; It shall blossom abundantly, waters shall burst forth in the wilderness, And streams in the desert. The parched ground shall become a pool, and the thirsty land springs of water...*” (Isa. 35:1-7 NKJV).

Mankind’s health will be restored also as the sentence of death, which brought about the dying process, is lifted: “*Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then the lame shall leap like a deer, And the tongue of the dumb sing*” (Isa. 35:5-6 NKJV).

The current governments and religions will also be replaced: “*For then I will restore to the peoples a pure language that they all may call on the name of the LORD, to serve Him with one accord*” (Zeph. 3:9 NKJV). “*No more shall every man teach his neighbor and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD', for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them*” (Jer. 31:34 NKJV).

The final step in the reconciliation process - the restoration of mankind to perfection - will be the removal of the death sentence itself: “*Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, 'Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men', and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away*” (Rev 21:2-4 NKJV).



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Veronica Daphne Wallace

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Veronica was born in Mackay Queensland where she spent her early childhood, before moving to Brisbane, then later Warwick, the Gold Coast, Longreach and Toowoomba. Veronica spent her last twenty five years at Lara Victoria, from where she and her sister and mother were able to become more involved with the Melbourne Class of Bible Students.

Veronica consecrated with her family nearly fifty years ago. As opportunities arose, she attended Bible Study meetings and Conventions, both in Melbourne and interstate. She had recently taken on the role, with her sister Kay of preparing the published copies of the People's Paper for posting.

In the latter years before her death, Veronica enjoyed researching her family tree and she and Kay, were able to travel to Mackay to attend family reunions and meet many family members. They both shared vivid and happy memories of these trips. A lesser known talent of Veronica's was her artistic ability. Although she had always displayed a talent for sketching, it was only in her later years that she took up oil painting and created many paintings mainly from her imagination and memory.

Her caring nature was particularly apparent in the carer and companionship role she shared with her mother until her mother's death at the age of 97, just four years before her own. In earlier years, she also took on a nursing-caring role for a number of years, for both Sr. and Br. Crouch in Queensland.

Veronica's life was her witness – gentle, gracious and humble. She had faith in the Biblical promises of an everlasting life after death and held onto that belief as she faced the unexpected end of her earthly life with quiet dignity.

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TAKE HEED THAT NO MAN DECEIVE YOU

In Matthew 24:3 it is recorded that the disciples asked Jesus “*what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?*” Jesus answered “*Take heed that no man deceive you. For many shall come in my name, saying, ‘I am Christ’; and shall deceive many*” (verses 4-5). Jesus’ words relate specifically to the time shortly before his second coming (or second presence: Greek ‘*parousia*’) and should heighten believers’ awareness of the power of the deceptions that would be, and are, in the world.

There are four components in Jesus’ answer: believers would need to take heed to ensure that they would not be deceived, there would be “*many*” who would “*come*”, they would claim to be Christ, and “*many*” would be deceived.

Take heed

Regarding the need for believers to “*take heed*”, Jesus warned his disciples that the deceptions at the end of the Age would be powerful, so powerful that if it were possible even the elect would be deceived: “*For there shall arise false Christs and false prophets, and shall show great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect*” (Matt. 24:24). Jesus’ words deserve emphasis: if it were possible even the elect could be led astray. Consequently there is great comfort in the Master’s words “*My father ... is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my father’s hand*” (John 10:29). The Christian’s task is to “*continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel*” (Col. 1:23).

“I am Christ”

Jesus said that many would “*say I am Christ*”. The meaning of the word “*Christ*” is anointed, and so those who would say that they were “*Christ*” would, in effect, be claiming to be anointed.

Christians are anointed with God’s Holy Spirit (1 John 2:27), and it is that Spirit that reveals the gospel to them (1 Cor. 2:10). There is only one God-given Spirit, the Holy Spirit. All other spirits are from Satan, the great deceiver who deceived Eve in the Garden of Eden (1 Tim. 2:14).

It is by the Holy Spirit that Christians are given a knowledge of God’s plan: “*Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God. Which things also we speak, not in the words which man’s wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man receiveth not the things*

of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. But he that is spiritual judgeth (“examines” - Revised Version margin) all things, yet he himself is judged of no man” (1 Cor. 2:12-15).

False Christs

The Apostle John alerted his readers to the existence of other spirits. He calls them “*false spirits*”: “*Beloved, believe not every Spirit, but prove the Spirits, whether they be of God, because many false Spirits are gone out into the world*” (1 John 4:1). The Apostle Paul warned the church at Corinth about these false spirits: “*But I fear, least by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve though his subtlety, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. For if he that cometh preacheth another Jesus, whom we have not preached, or, if ye receive another Spirit, which ye have not received, or another gospel, which ye have not accepted, ye might well bear with him*” (2 Cor. 11:3-4). Paul was ‘concerned’ that they would “*bear*” with the false spirits who were preaching another Jesus, and that their mingling with them would result in some being led astray.

Paul was concerned even though he was writing to Christians who had been taught the true gospel, “*the gospel of the kingdom*”. At that time anti-Christ was only beginning, yet Paul said he feared lest these Christians might be led astray by those who would be preaching “*another gospel*”. He warned them that they would be “*clothed with the same subtlety with which the serpent beguiled Eve*”.

How to identify false spirits

Consequently it is natural to ask “How does one know whether a preacher is speaking by the Holy Spirit or by a false spirit?

It can be difficult to identify who has the Holy Spirit and who is under the influence of a false spirit. The task is made more difficult by the fact that the Holy Spirit is manifested in various ways in different individuals: “*Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit ... For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom; to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit; To another faith by the same Spirit; to another the gifts of healing by the same Spirit; To another the working of miracles; to another prophecy; to another discerning of spirits; to another divers kinds of tongues; to another the interpretation of tongues: But all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will. For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are*

one body: so also is Christ ... For the body is not one member but many" (1 Cor. 12:4-14).

However the Scriptures provide Christians with several tests that may be used to identify false spirits. While Christians are not to judge (Matt. 7:1), they are to be "*as wise as serpents*" because they go forth "*as sheep in the midst of wolves*" (Matt. 10:16). Christians need to be wise so that they are able to identify false spirits and avoid them.

Fruits of the Spirit

One of the characteristics that indicates whether a preacher is motivated by the Holy Spirit is their fruits. Jesus said: "*Beware of false prophets which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravening wolves...By their fruits ye shall know them*" (Matt. 7:15-16). The extent to which the fruits of the spirit (Gal. 5:22-23) are displayed is readily apparent and a lack of the fruits is a sure indication that the preacher is not motivated by the Holy Spirit. A person who shows good fruitage is not necessarily a Christian believer, but anyone who professes to be a Christian must exhibit the fruits. If they do not, it is evident that their faith is not sound and they are not motivated by the Holy Spirit but by a false spirit.

The development of the fruits of the spirit depends firstly on the acknowledgement of God as the Supreme Being. Any prophet who claims to be anointed with God's Holy Spirit must acknowledge that God is the creator of the universe and is Lord of all. As the Wise Man said: "*The fear (reverence) of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom*" (Prov. 9:10). Any prophet who denies the existence of God and proclaims that Man was not created by a Supreme Being but evolved from some lower creature, does not have the very basis of the wisdom detailed in the Scriptures and therefore is unable to understand anything of God's plan for mankind. Such a one might "*have a form of godliness but (they) deny the power thereof*", and the exhortation to Christians is to "*turn away*" from them (2 Tim. 3:5).

Jesus' ancestry

Another criterion that Christians may use to decide whether one is preaching the true gospel is given in 1 John 4:2: "*Hereby know ye the spirit of God; every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God*". Jesus declared "... *I proceeded forth and came from God; neither came I of myself, but he sent me*" (John 8:42). Unless one preaches the pre-existence of Jesus their message is not the true gospel. The Scriptures declare that Jesus, as the Logos, was the "*beginning of the creation of God*" (Rev. 3:14), and that "*the world was made by Him and without Him was not anything made that was made*" (John 1:3). He was with the Father "*before Abraham*

was" (John 8:58). Belief in, and the preaching of, the pre-existence of Jesus is a sure test whether any message is the true gospel. 2 John 7 states: "*For many deceivers have gone out into the world, even they that confess not that Jesus Christ did come in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the anti-Christ*" (Revised Version).

The gospel of the kingdom

Jesus said "*this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations*" (Matt. 24:14). Jesus' statement includes two criteria – the message would be a "*gospel*", and the gospel would be of "*a kingdom*".

The word "*gospel*" means "*good news*" or "*glad tidings*" as the heavenly messengers announced to the shepherds: "*Behold I bring you glad tidings of great joy, for unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord*" (Luke 2:10). The gospel message is a message of great joy and any message that declares otherwise is not the gospel. Consequently any preacher who teaches fear and torment is not preaching the gospel and therefore may be dismissed as being an oracle of God.

Jesus proclaimed that "*this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations*" (Matt. 24:14). These words define the gospel: it is the good news of the kingdom. Consequently, regardless of how impressive any preacher might be, unless they preach the gospel of the kingdom, their "*gospel*" is "*not another*" (Gal. 1:6-7).

Daniel 2:44 details several characteristics of the kingdom: "*And in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed: and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever*". The prophecy is clear: the God of heaven will set up the kingdom, it will replace all other kingdoms, and it will last forever. Unless a preacher proclaims this kingdom they are not preaching as Jesus proclaimed.

Unity of the Spirit

A further test that may be used to determine whether a preacher is declaring the gospel is whether their messages promote unity or strife. In the words of the Apostle Paul: "*Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them. For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by their smooth and fair speech, beguile the hearts of the innocent*" (Rom. 16:17-18). The true gospel message should strive to bring the believers together and not cause them to separate. The importance of building unity and not

division is so great that Paul wrote: “*Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ... Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; but speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things ...*” (Eph. 4:3, 15). Any teaching that does not strive to unify the believers is not the gospel: “*where envying and strife is there is confusion and every evil work*” (James 3:16). This is not to say that the Christian must keep the peace at any price, but that the endeavour must be to keep the **unity of the Spirit**, remembering that God has “*set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him*”, and that it is He who “*worketh all things after the counsel of His own will*” (1 Cor. 12:18; Eph. 1:11).

“Smooth talk”

The Apostle Paul also alerted the church at Rome to those who “*by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple*” (Rom. 16:18). This deception was so powerful and widespread that he also warned the brethren at both Ephesus and Colosse (Eph. 5:6; Col. 2:4). He also gave Titus clear instruction about those who tried to deceive by words: “*For there are many unruly, and vain talkers and deceivers ... whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole houses ...*” (Titus 1:10-11).

In this vein it is significant that Paul did not claim to give such a presentation, but rather “*I...when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God*” (1 Cor. 2:1). The thought behind “*excellency*” is “*prominence*” or “*superiority*” and so it is evident that the Apostle Paul did not strive to win converts by the quality of his speech but by the substance of his message – “*that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God*” (1 Cor. 2:5). Christians should be wary of those whose aim to attract by glamorous performances and who despise those who are of humble presentation.

The temptation presented by the “smooth talkers” in Corinth caused the Apostle Paul to resort to “*boasting a little*” that he “*may cut off occasion from them that desire occasion ... for such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the Apostles of Christ*”. He continues: “*And no marvel, for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. Therefore, it is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness ...*” (2 Cor. 11:12-18). Glamorous presentation and “smooth talk” are not fruits of the Holy Spirit.

Bondage

Paul found it necessary to warn some members of the church at Galatia for their tendency to be led away from the true gospel, and their freedom in Christ unto “*another gospel*” which he says “*is not another*” (Gal. 1:6-7). They were being persuaded that it was necessary to be circumcised and keep the law of the Jews. In Galatians 2:4 the Apostle wrote that this attempt to pervert the gospel of Christ was the work of false brethren who “*came in to spy out the liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us to bondage*”. Christians living at the close of the current era should be aware of any preacher who endeavours to bind them to an organization, or in any way restricts their liberty to individually study God’s word. It is before the judgment seat of Christ that all will appear, and the criteria there will not include allegiance to any earthly ordinance (2 Cor. 5:10) but steadfastness to the faith.

There are many other doctrines that indicate whether one is preaching by the Holy Spirit, one being that Jesus died to give His “*life a ransom for all, to be testified in due time*” (1 Tim. 2:6). Also the resurrection of the dead as proclaimed by the Apostle Paul: “*there shall be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and the unjust*” (Acts 24:15). Also, do they vigorously preach the necessity to develop the fruits of the spirit that their followers are prepared to “*lay aside the filth of the flesh*” (1 Pet. 3:21) and take unto themselves the “*whole armour of God*” and “*stand against the wiles of the devil*” (Eph. 6:11).

A broader view

There is yet another aspect of the deceptions that confront the Christian in the last days of the Age. These further deceptions arise from a lack of purpose. Strong’s Concordance defines the Greek word translated “*deceive*” in Matthew 24:5 as “#4105: ... to (properly cause to) roam (from safety, truth, or virtue)”. It is translated as “*go astray, deceive, err, seduce, wander, be out of the way*”. The concepts of “*roaming*”, “*going astray*” and “*wandering*” might not be deceptions, but nevertheless such aimless wanderings with no fixed objective in mind makes one vulnerable to going astray. The Christian’s journey must be one of purpose and dedication: “*Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run that ye may obtain*” (1 Cor. 9:24).

Consequences

Believing and acting in accordance with the true gospel results in the believers being despised and rejected by the world of mankind. The believers will be regarded as “*a peculiar people*” (Titus 2:14; 1 Pet. 2:9). One powerful consolation for the Christian is that “*The reason why the world does not know us, is that it does not know Him*” (1 John 3:1 RSV).

KING NEBUCHADNEZZAR

In Romans 15:4 the Apostle Paul declares, “*whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope*”. Much of the Old Testament is an historical record of events that took place several centuries ago, and therefore may seem to be of little relevance to the Christian today. However the Old Testament books of the Bible also contain prophecies, some of which have already been fulfilled, and some of which have not yet been fulfilled. The fact that some have come to pass precisely as they predicted should give confidence that all of the prophecies in God’s word will be fulfilled in God’s due time. As the prophet Habakkuk stated, “*for the vision is yet for an appointed time, but at the end it shall speak, and not lie: though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry*” (Hab. 2:3). Christians may therefore derive much comfort from the statement in Romans 15:4 “*that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope*”. Christians need to have patience while they wait for God’s program to unfold, and the prophecies that have already been fulfilled give assurance that the remainder will be fulfilled. As the Apostle Peter wrote “*we have also a more sure word of prophecy ...*” (2 Pet. 1:19).

One individual who features in both the history and prophecy of the Old Testament is Nebuchadnezzar.

History of Nebuchadnezzar

Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, was a mighty conqueror. “*In his days Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon ... had taken all that belonged to the king of Egypt from the Brook of Egypt to the River Euphrates ...*” (2 Kings 24:1-7 NKJV). It was under his rule that Israel was carried away captive to Babylon as recorded in 1 Chronicles 6:15: “*... the LORD carried Judah and Jerusalem into captivity by the hand of Nebuchadnezzar*”, including “*the vessels of the house of the LORD*”, which Nebuchadnezzar put “*in his temple at Babylon*” (2Chron. 36:7). In all, Nebuchadnezzar took 4600 persons captive to Babylon (Jer. 52:28-30).

Babylon was a great and glorious empire, and some historians credit Nebuchadnezzar with the building of the legendary Hanging Gardens of Babylon - one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

The Scriptures do not record Nebuchadnezzar’s death, neither is there a clear account of his demise. The last reference to his exploits is in Daniel 4:37 where it is recorded that he proclaimed “*Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, all of*

whose works are truth, and His ways justice. And those who walk in pride He is able to put down”. Some historians suggest that he died in 561BC after reigning in Babylon for 43 years. His son, Belshazzar, succeeded him (Dan. 5:1-2).

God’s servant

Nebuchadnezzar was one of God’s servants, and as one of God’s servants Nebuchadnezzar ‘merely’ carried out God’s will. The prophet Jeremiah states: “*Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel ... I have made the earth, the man and the beast that are on the ground, by My great power and by My outstretched arm, and have given it to whom it seemed proper to Me. And now I have given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, My servant ...*” (Jer. 27:4-6 NJKV). In this statement Jeremiah proclaims God’s authority by declaring that it is God who created the Earth and placed Man on it, and it is God who gave the lands to Nebuchadnezzar.

In this respect, Nebuchadnezzar was in the same category as Pharaoh before him (Rom. 9:17) and Cyrus after him (2 Chron. 36:23; Isa. 44:28), and that realisation adds considerably to the importance of his exploits.

The capture of Judah and Jerusalem, and their exile in Babylon, was an amazing military feat. However of no lesser significance is the fact that Nebuchadnezzar had two dreams.

Nebuchadnezzar’s first dream

Nebuchadnezzar’s first dream is recorded in Daniel 2. It was a very vivid and somewhat startling dream; it was not an ordinary dream. When Nebuchadnezzar awoke he could not remember the details. None of the wise men of Babylon or the astrologers could reveal the dream to him, but God revealed it to Daniel. God revealed it to Daniel in answer to Daniel’s supplications and those of his three companions. It was a message from God revealing what was to happen on the world scene, commencing at that time and culminating well over 3000 years later.

Some of the main points of the dream were:

- The dream was of a great image of a man.
- Its head was of fine gold, its breast and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of brass; its legs of iron, and its feet part of iron and part of clay.
- A stone was cut out without hands, which smote the image upon its feet, and broke it into pieces.
- The iron, the clay, the brass, the silver and the gold were broken in pieces together, and became like the

chaff of the summer threshing floors, and the wind carried them away.

- The stone that smote the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth.

God told Daniel that the significance of these features meant:

- The God of heaven gave Nebuchadnezzar the kingdom (Dan. 2:37-38).
- The head of gold represented Nebuchadnezzar (verse 38).
- The other parts of the image represented kingdoms that would subsequently rule on the Earth (verses 39-40).
- The fourth kingdom would be strong as iron, and it would break others in pieces and crush them (verse 40).
- The fourth kingdom would be a divided kingdom, part of it being potters' clay and part iron; partly strong and partly broken (verses 41-42).
- The fourth kingdom would mingle with the seed of men; but they would not cleave one to another (verse 43).
- In the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms (verse 44).
- God's kingdom will stand forever (verse 44).

Nebuchadnezzar acknowledged that the interpretation given by Daniel was from his God, who is "*a God of gods*" (Dan. 2:47). However Nebuchadnezzar soon strayed away from acknowledging Daniel's God. He built a great image and demanded that all people worship it (Dan. 3). The refusal of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to do so resulted in them being cast into the fiery furnace, and their survival once again caused Nebuchadnezzar to give praise to God: "*Nebuchadnezzar the king, unto all people, nations, and languages, that dwell in all the earth ... I thought it good to show the signs and wonders that the high God hath wrought toward me ...*" (Dan. 4:1-2).

Historical Fulfilment

Three of the kingdoms portrayed in Nebuchadnezzar's first dream are identified in the book of Daniel. Firstly, the head of gold represented Nebuchadnezzar himself, as king of Babylon: "*thou art this head of gold*" (Dan. 2:38). Chapter 5:28 states that the Babylonian kingdom would be divided and "*given to the Medes and Persians*", and in chapter 8:20-21, through a vision given to Daniel (of the "*ram and the rough goat*"), it is foretold that the kingdom would then pass to Greece. The fourth kingdom, the kingdom that was to be as "*strong as iron*" and yet "*... be a divided kingdom ... partly strong and partly broken*", is not named in the Scriptures.

The three named kingdoms did come into being and

were subsequently overthrown by the next kingdom in the order given in Daniel's prophecy. Such a sequence of events gives confidence that the Bible is indeed the Word of God, and that the prophecies in it that have not yet been fulfilled will indeed come to pass.

The dream still relevant

While the first three kingdoms of Nebuchadnezzar's dream came into existence and disappeared a long time ago, the dream has not yet been completely fulfilled. The prophecy is that "*...in the days of those kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed, nor shall the sovereignty thereof be left to another people; but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever*" (Dan. 2:44). God's kingdom is yet to be established on Earth as Christians the world over continue to pray "*thy kingdom come, thy will be done in earth as in heaven*" (Matt. 6:10). The hope of that kingdom is one of the bulwarks of the Christian faith because it promises a world of prosperity such as never has existed in the history of Man. The prophet Isaiah describes it thus: "*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 forever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this*" (Isa. 9:7).

The prospect of a kingdom that will bring peace, which will bring justice and which will never end, is a prospect that politicians today can only dream about. The failure of governments so far to bring about such a regime adds greatly to the significance of the final sentence of Isaiah 9:7: - "*the zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this*". Since no man-made kingdom has ever succeeded in bringing about such a wonderful regime, it is naive to continue to hope that any man-made kingdom will ever be able to do so. The factor that makes such a hope realistic is that "*the zeal of the Lord of hosts*" will bring it about, and the historical record of the fulfilment of the first three kingdoms foretold by Nebuchadnezzar's dream is a source of great assurance that this promise of God will be fulfilled.

Nebuchadnezzar's second dream

Soon after his proclamation following the deliverance of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego from the fiery furnace, Nebuchadnezzar had a second dream. It is recorded in Daniel 4:4-37. Again, Daniel was the only one to whom God revealed the meaning of the dream. The dream prophesied that Nebuchadnezzar would be abased and would "*eat grass like the oxen and be wet with the dew of heaven*" for a period of "*seven times*".

However, in spite of the vision and its interpretation,

Nebuchadnezzar became proud and again took the honour for his glory unto himself. Daniel 4:30 reads “*The king spoke, and said, 'Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for the house of the kingdom by the might of my power, and for the honour of my majesty?'*”

While he was still boasting of his accomplishments, indeed “*while the word was still in the king's mouth, a voice fell from heaven: 'King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is spoken: the kingdom has departed from you! And they shall drive you from men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. They shall make you eat grass like oxen; and seven times shall pass over you, until you know that the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, and gives it to whomever He chooses'.* That very hour the word was fulfilled concerning Nebuchadnezzar; he was driven from men and ate grass like oxen; his body was wet with the dew of heaven till his hair had grown like eagles' feathers and his nails like birds' claws. And at the end of the time I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my understanding returned to me; and I blessed the Most High and praised and honoured Him who lives forever. For His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom is from generation to generation. All the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing; He does according to His will in the army of heaven. Among the inhabitants of the earth no-one can restrain His hand or say to Him, 'What have You done?' At the same time my reason returned to me, and for the glory of my kingdom, my honour and splendour returned to me. My counsellors and nobles resorted to me, I was restored to my kingdom, and excellent majesty was added to me. Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, all of whose works are truth, and His ways justice. And those who walk in pride He is able to put down” (Dan. 4:31-37).

Is there greater significance?

In spite of the drama of Nebuchadnezzar's military exploits and the prophecies entwined in his dreams, such an extensive record of the life of one king may seem to be an expensive means of conveying some simple truths to Christians. Since the spirit “*searches all things, yea the deep things of God*” (1 Cor. 2:10), Christians might feel that there is greater significance in these events than the superficial lessons that are immediately evident.

Such searching may lead to some interesting similarities. However, while these similarities may reflect some wonderful aspects of God's plan, unless they can be established as categorical teachings of His word, they cannot be put forward as a basis for faith, but merely as aids that increase the Christian's wonder at, and worship of, their Creator (Rom. 11:33-36).

One suggestion that has been made is that Nebuchadnezzar's life portrays the history of the human race. Both Adam and Nebuchadnezzar enjoyed great authority and glory that was given to them directly by God. Of Adam it is recorded that “*God said 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth'.* So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, '...have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth'” (Gen.1:26-28). Adam's position was indeed glorious; he had dominion over every living creature on the Earth, and to him was given the privilege of naming the animals (Gen.2:19-20).

However Nebuchadnezzar became proud and so God humbled him by blinding him for a period of time. Adam also became proud in that he deliberately disobeyed God and ate the forbidden fruit. He was humbled also by being cast out of the garden and being forced to earn his living by the sweat of his brow. This will also be for a period of time.

However one difference between the parallels is that Nebuchadnezzar had his health restored to him in this life whereas Adam died (Gen. 5:5). Nevertheless Nebuchadnezzar's life is an accurate parallel in terms of the ultimate outcome because Mankind will eventually, after experiencing this life of decay and death, come to realize that God's provisions are best for them: “*Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established on the top of the mountains, And shall be exalted above the hills; And all nations shall flow to it. Many people shall come and say, 'Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, To the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, And we shall walk in His paths'*” (Isa. 2:1-2). The promise is that, when God's kingdom is established in the Earth, all nations will voluntarily flow to it: “*Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD*”.

Seven times

The prophecy in Daniel 4:25 specifies that Nebuchadnezzar would eat grass of the field until “*seven times had passed over him*”. The question may be asked whether there is any significance in the term “*seven times*”, and whether there is any parallel that may be drawn with it and other parts of God's plan.

A detailed consideration of the significance of the term “*seven times*” is reserved for a future issue.

Love Does Not Envy

One of the greatest challenges that confronts the Christian is overcoming envy. However they must overcome it if they are to develop love to the standard defined by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:4: “*charity (love) envieth not*” (KJV). There is no room for envy in love.

A lifetime’s work

Envy is inherent in natural man, as the Apostle James declares: “*The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy*” (Jas. 4:5), and therefore conscious effort is required to overcome that disposition. The Apostle Peter exhorts all to “*lay aside all ... envies*”, and “*as newborn babes desire the sincere milk of the word that we may grow thereby*” (1 Pet. 2:1-2). Milk is the appropriate spiritual food for “*babes in Christ*” (1 Cor. 3:1-2), nevertheless the Apostle exhorts even these to “*lay aside all envy*”. Hence the task of rooting out envy must commence as soon as one decides to embark on the narrow way.

Paul’s sequence

In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul refers to envy immediately after he lists kindness: “*love is kind; love envieth not*”. The statement that “*love is kind*” is a positive one - it relates to something we must develop, whereas “*love envieth not*” is negative - it refers to something we must suppress. Just as positive and negative are direct opposites, so also are kindness and envy. Kindness is concerned with helping another whereas envy is concerned with usurping another’s possessions, whether they be of a material (concrete) nature or of an emotional (abstract) nature.

Material possessions

One source of envy is the possession of material goods. In Genesis 26:12-14 it is recorded that “*Isaac ... had possession of flocks, and possession of herds, and great store of servants, and the Philistines envied him*”. The Philistines were envious of Isaac’s material possessions. Likewise “*when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister*” (Gen. 30:1). Leah had children, and the prestige of motherhood. Rachel had neither and desired both. It was Leah’s greater material possessions that caused Rachel to envy her. The challenge for Christians is to not let another’s material possessions make them envious.

Esteem

The esteem given to another can give rise to envy. Genesis 37:3-4 records Jacob’s love for Joseph: “*Israel (Jacob) loved Joseph more than all his children ... and when his brethren saw that their father loved him more than all his brethren, they hated him ...*”. They envied Joseph because of Jacob’s greater love for him. Christians must not let another’s

greater esteem cause them to envy, but instead they must strive to “*let our conversation (conduct) be without covetousness, and be content with such things as we have ...*” (Heb. 13:5).

Authority

Envy can also arise when one person has more authority than another. When Joseph told his brothers of his dreams that indicated they would be subordinate to him, “*his brethren envied him*” (Gen. 37:11). This prospect caused “*the patriarchs (to be) moved with envy, (and to sell) Joseph into Egypt*” (Acts 7:9). It is easy to be envious of those who have authority over us, in either secular or spiritual matters.

In relation to authority in spiritual matters, the exhortation is “*to know them which ... are over you in the Lord, and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love for their work’s sake*” (1 Thess. 5:12-13). Christians must not be envious of those whom the Lord has placed over them.

Regarding authority in secular matters, the instruction is to “*submit ... to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake...*” (1 Pet. 2:13). Rather than contest their authority Christians are to pray “*for all that are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty*” (1 Tim. 2:2). It is helpful to always have clearly in mind that the “*things which are seen are temporal*” (2 Cor. 4:18), and those things include secular authority. May we always “*look not at the things which are seen ... but at the things which are not seen*” because the things that are not seen are the ones that are eternal.

Popularity

Matthew 27:18 tells us that the Jews were envious of Jesus - “*for he knew that for envy they had delivered him*”. Mark 12:37 reads: “*the common people heard him gladly*”(KJV). Jesus was popular with the common people; it was the Jewish rulers who were envious of him. Greater popularity can be a source of envy, and care is required to ensure that one does not envy those who are more popular than themselves.

May all strive to overcome the natural inclination to be envious, and having “*purified our souls ... love one another... fervently*” (1 Peter 1:22).

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