

The City of God

MOST PEOPLE VISUALIZE earth's early society as being purely agricultural with very little urban development. This is not so. Recent archaeological discoveries of ancient cities reveal evidence of urban planning in ancient times. An article published in the *New York Times* had the title: "Levittown on the Euphrates." Mr. Levitt is well-known for the two Levittowns built soon after World War II, one on Long Island, Nassau County in New York, and the other in Bucks County in Pennsylvania. Both provided low cost housing initially for World War II veterans, and later for many other people. They were good examples of modern urban planning. The *New York Times* article shows that such planning was not new, but was employed by people living in the third millennium B.C.

LEVITTOWN ON THE EUPHRATES

We quote from the article: "A city that throbbed with vitality in the third millennium B.C. lies buried, forlorn and silent, beneath the windblown soil of the Upper Euphrates River Valley in southeastern Turkey. Gone are the clatter on cobblestones and the cries and murmurs of family life behind mud brick walls. But the ruins speak to archaeologists of a time when a revolutionary idea may have shaped the newest cities in antiquity.

"Mapping the site of the city, known today as Titris Hoyuk, archaeologists are delineating the usual urban remains. At the center once stood a palace and other public buildings on high ground. Out from there, streets ran through residential neighborhoods. Beyond city walls lay a cemetery and scattered suburbs.

“On closer examination, however, archaeologists have found surprises. The streets and terrace walls appear to have been laid out and built before the houses. And the houses seem to follow a master plan, some larger than others, but all of the same design.

“Archaeologists are thus drawn to the conclusion that Titris Hoyuk, population 10,000 in its heyday, represents a striking example of urban planning in antiquity. Built in about 2500 B.C., this was a kind of Levittown-on-the Euphrates.

“‘There was a centralized vision of what a city should look like that appears remarkably similar to a typical master-planned community in the United States today’, said Dr. Guillermo Algaze of the University of California at San Diego, who is directing the excavations.

“Dr. Gil Stein, an archaeologist at Northwestern University, who has excavated in the same region, called the explorations at Titris ‘very, very important research, which gives us a whole new look on what urbanism was like in the ancient Middle East.’”

RAPID GROWTH REQUIRES PLANNING

“Scholars had long ago established that the first cities anywhere arose about 5,000 years ago in the lower valley of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, an area known as Mesopotamia that is part of present-day Iraq. Cities were presumably an outgrowth of an increasingly productive agriculture. Crop surpluses supported expanding long-distance trade and freed people to specialize in such crafts as textiles and ceramics. As the number of merchants and artisans grew, farm villages evolved into cities.

“By the middle of the third millennium B.C., it now appears, the first experiments in city living were such resounding successes that people were flocking to new cities over the entire region, in what is now Syria, northern Iraq and Turkey. This excavation, and similar

clues at other sites in northern Mesopotamia, suggest that only well-planned construction projects could satisfy their needs fast enough. Further work at Titris and other sites is expected to reveal some of the changing social and political forces behind this rapid expansion of urban civilization and the innovation of planned cities.”

THE FIRST BIBLICAL CITIES

The first city mentioned in the Bible is the one that Cain built. (Gen. 4:17) Not much is known about that city, though it is believed to be composed of raised dwellings, most likely on a hill, with walls for protection. The Hebrew words *'iyr'*, *'ar'*, and *'ayar'*, have been translated 'city', and they mean 'something raised up', 'walls reared', and 'keeping guard'.

No more is said about cities until after the great Deluge, and the offspring of Noah's three sons are mentioned. One of the descendants of Ham was Nimrod, and the "beginning of his kingdom was Babel, and Erech, and Accad, and Calneh, in the land of Shinar." (Gen. 10:10) These were believed to be cities in the kingdom of Babylonia. Verses 11 and 12 tell of the building of another great city—Nineveh. Some translations assign Nimrod to building this city, but others name Asshur, who they say built Nineveh when he was forced out of Shinar by Nimrod.

ABRAHAM: CITY DWELLER BECOMES A NOMAD

What is noticeable from these scriptures is that cities were definitely a development of early times. Those involved in agriculture used a city as a central location for dwelling and for protection. In contrast, those raising livestock were nomads, seeking different grazing areas and living in tents. Such became the situation of Abraham, who lived in Ur of the Chaldees, and was a

city dweller. He was asked by God to leave Ur and to go to a strange country. He obeyed God and began to travel towards this new country, taking with him Sarah, his wife, Lot, his nephew, and Terah, his father. They traveled along the Euphrates River and came to Haran—another city—where they stayed until Terah died.

In the time they lived in Haran, they accumulated many possessions including livestock and servants. Leaving Haran with these belongings, they became nomads living in tents, eventually entering the land of Canaan. The account in Genesis does not tell us that Abraham sought a city as he sojourned in Canaan. The Apostle Paul supplies this information, saying: “By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went. By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles [tents] with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker [architect] is God.” (Heb. 11:8-10) From this account we know that Abraham was seeking the ‘city of God’.

Nomads dwelling in tents live in temporary quarters. In seeking new grazing land for the livestock, the tents are convenient so that the home can be moved from one area to another. A city dweller, on the other hand, has a permanent dwelling. Once he acquires a home in a city he is not likely to move. Abraham was seeking just such a permanent dwelling place. But not simply any city would do—only ‘the city of God’ could be the place he sought.

ABRAHAM AND LOT SEPARATE

Abraham and Lot had their own herds and servants. After leaving Haran, both groups traveled together. When strife arose between their herdsmen, it became necessary for them to part company. Abraham gave Lot first choice of the land, and when Lot saw that the plain of Jordan was well watered, he chose that land. He pitched

his tent toward Sodom, a city in the plain of Jordan. Abraham went in the opposite direction, to the plain of Mamre. Shortly after this separation, Lot became a citizen of Sodom, and “sat in the gate.”—Gen. 19:1

It might appear that Lot fared better than Abraham in selecting the fertile plain of Jordan and in finding a city. But the Scriptures tell us, “The men of Sodom were wicked and sinners before the Lord exceedingly.” (Gen. 13:13) On the other hand, Abraham continued to live in tents (temporary dwellings) while he continued to look for the city of God. He did not find that city during his entire sojourn in the land of Canaan, but his faith was strong, and he believed that one day he would find it.

In the Book of Hebrews, after Paul’s mention of Abraham’s quest for a city, two references are made to a figurative city. The first occurs after a description of a terrifying scene at Mount Sinai, when the tables of the Law were received by Moses. Speaking to the Lord’s people, the church, he says, “Ye are come unto Mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.” (Heb. 12:22,23) The second occurs later when Paul says, “Here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come.”—Heb. 13:14

EXPERIENCES OF JESUS AND HIS FOLLOWERS

Abraham’s experiences were intended to foreshadow the history of God’s people during the Gospel Age. Abraham never found the city he sought in this world; likewise, neither do we. Lot, on the other hand, did, and represents many in Christendom who believe that they have found the city of God in this world. As Abraham was a ‘pilgrim and a stranger on earth’ so also God’s people are pilgrims and strangers as sojourners on earth. As Abraham lived in a temporary abode, we, too, have no abiding city here, but ‘seek one’ as a permanent abode. Abraham had faith that he would find the ‘city of God’; so also must we have the same faith. Jesus, too, had no

permanent abode upon earth, no place he could truly call home. He said, “The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head.”—Matt. 8:20

Jesus had no permanent earthly home, but he knew that he would have a heavenly home. He wanted his disciples to be with him, so he told them, “In my Father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.” (John 14:2,3) When we reach this place, we will have reached our permanent abode—the city of God.

‘CITY’ AS A GOVERNMENT OR KINGDOM

A city was intended to represent more than merely the concept of permanence. In the Bible it is also used to represent a government or a kingdom. Cities of old were often nations in themselves, and most had walls and were self-sufficient. Some of the great cities of the ancient world were Babylon, Nineveh, Athens, Damascus, Rome. The power and might of the nation flowed from the city.

Not much is known about the very early cities of men except as archaeologists unearth them along with their secrets. One of the cities built by Nimrod became the site of the great city, Babylon. In its glory, Babylon had walls reported to be 300 feet high, extending for sixty miles around the city. It was famous for its iron gates and hanging, or terraced, gardens. Cities, at first, were intended to be centers for special services, trades, and for government. The latest archaeological excavations give evidence of planning so cities could provide dwellings for the poorest of people.

Cities became centers of power and their governments ruled the surrounding areas of land in which they were located. There was little benefit for an enemy merely to conquer the land in the vicinity of the city, because the city itself had to be conquered for victory to

be complete. The seat of government, power, and authority resided in the city. The walls of the city were formidable protection. The people of that ancient era understood the illustration used by Solomon when he said, “He that hath no rule over his own spirit is like a city that is broken down, and without walls.” (Prov. 25:28) A city without walls was an easy prey for the enemy. The lesson for us is that anyone unable to control his emotions is an easy prey for his enemies: the Devil, the world, and the flesh, and he can be overrun by them.

GOD’S PLAN COMPLETED

God is the greatest of urban planners, and his holy city is designed to accommodate the poor and downtrodden of all nations. Everyone will have a place to dwell. The city of God is described in Revelation 21:10-23, and those who will occupy it are “the nations of them which are saved,” and these “shall walk in the light of it: and the kings of the earth do bring their glory and honour into it. And the gates of it shall not be shut at all by day: for there shall be no night there. And they shall bring the glory and honour of the nations into it. And there shall in no wise enter into it any thing that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination, or maketh a lie: but they which are written in the Lamb’s book of life.”—Rev. 21:24-27

One might get the impression that the present nations and kings of earth as we know them will bring their glory into this city. However, we know that the glory of this present sinful world has no place in this city. This is clearly shown later where it is written: “Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city. For without are dogs, and sorcerers, and whoremongers, and murderers, and idolaters, and whosoever loveth and maketh a lie.”—Rev. 22:14,15

In God's wonderful kingdom, all will have to obey his righteous laws or perish. The purpose of giving life to all mankind in the resurrection is to restore them to the image of God. During the Millennial Age, the people will 'walk up' "the way of holiness" (Isa. 35:8) toward perfection.

As they 'walk', "light" (Rev. 21:11) from the city will guide them so they can "enter in." (Rev. 22:14) Not until all mankind have been brought to perfection and are in God's image—perfect morally, mentally, and capable of having dominion as kings—will they be able to enter into this city.

This then is the 'glory' that the nations and kings bring into the city. Isaiah 60:21 states the matter well: "Thy people also shall be all righteous: they shall inherit the land for ever, the branch of my planting, the work of my hands, that I may be glorified."

Love One Another

Key Verse: “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.”

—John 13:35

Selected Scriptures:

Mark 12:28-34;

Luke 6:27-31;

John 13:34, 35

WHEN ONE OF THE scribes asked Jesus which is the greatest commandment (Mark 12:28), Jesus saw an opportunity to introduce an important truth of the Gospel message—that of love for one another. From his prehuman experience as the *Logos*, Jesus knew that love was the basis for God’s plan and that this same God-like characteristic would be required of all seeking to be righteous.

Jesus acknowledged the first, and greatest, commandment, saying: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment.” (Mark 12: 30) Faith in God and his plan for human redemption should trigger an automatic response of love in our hearts for the knowledge that he “so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son” (John 3:16), and that “he loved us, even when we were dead in sins.”—Eph 2:4,5

God is deserving of love and obedience from all his intelligent creatures, not merely from the outward appearance, but from the innermost recesses of the heart. Only such love is acceptable to our Creator.

Jesus calls our attention to the second commandment saying, “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these.”—Mark 12:31

In reality he was saying that the way in which we show our love for God, whom we cannot see, is to demonstrate this quality to ‘our

neighbor'. Who is our 'neighbor'? Is it the person who lives next to us, or across the street? Is it the people we see most often in the everyday experiences of life? Jesus' teaching provides an answer.

First, Jesus shows us that we are to love those who are out of harmony with righteousness—those considered enemies of God and of us. This is a completely unselfish love. It looks for nothing in return from those upon whom it is bestowed. It is a love of the individual, not of the evil they may do against God or his people.

It is the same kind of love God has shown them in that he sent his Son to die "the just for the unjust." (I Pet. 3:18) As God's people, we must develop this aspect of love for our neighbor if we are to be found faithful. "Love your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again, and your reward shall be great, and ye shall be the children of the Highest."—Luke 6:35

The second class Jesus shows as our neighbors are his people seeking to be faithful to him. He says, "A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another." (John 13:34,35) Love of our brethren in Christ is a most essential element of the fulfillment of the commandment of love for our neighbor. We love them because we see the character of Christ being developed in their lives. We see them striving against their fallen nature, the world, and the devil to be faithful, even until death and love them. We are also doing so.

Truly it is said, "We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren."—I John 3:14

First Things First

Key Verse: “And he said unto them, Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man’s life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth.”

—Luke 12:15

THE SETTING OF LIFE’S priorities properly is a very important element in the development of the child of God. It is of such importance that our success or failure in this effort likely will yield its results in our overall faithfulness to God. Jesus gave us as well as his disciples, needed counsel in this regard.

Selected Scripture:

Luke 12:13-21

Jesus was approached by one of his listeners who asked him to speak to a family member about dividing the family inheritance, rather than having it go to one individual. (Luke 12:13) Knowing the wisdom of Jesus’ teaching, he felt certain that the Master would resolve the issue ‘fairly’, and suggest that the inheritance be divided.

Jesus’ response to the man’s request was twofold. First, he said it was not part of his ministry to become involved in these types of issues. He continued, asking, “Man, who made me a judge or a divider over you?” (Luke 12:14) Jesus saw it as none of his business to become involved in the temporal affairs and conflicts of others, even those who professed to be his followers. The Apostle Paul repeated this sentiment when he admonished the church, “Study to be quiet, and to do your own business.”—I Thess. 4:11

More important was the second part of Jesus’ response in our Key Verse. He warned the man against covetousness, stating that the most important things of life do not relate to the abundance of earthly possessions. (Luke 12:15) This should be particularly true among all striving to follow in Jesus’ footsteps of sacrifice.

Further illustrating this lesson, Jesus gave a parable: “The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully: And he thought within himself, saying, What shall I do, because I have no room where to bestow my fruits? ... This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods. ... I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry. But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided? So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.”—Luke 12: 16-21

Those striving to follow in the footsteps of the Master should use the major portion of time along spiritual lines. And although temporal needs must be reasonably met for ourselves and those for whom we are responsible, these should not be the most pressing and time-consuming issues of life to the Lord’s people. The ‘rich man’ in the parable was so consumed with the care and safety of his riches, he put in jeopardy his relationship with God. Even after safely laying up his goods, he did not look toward serving God, but to living a life of ease and pleasure according to the flesh.

This parable, and other scriptures, give clear evidence that we must “lay up for [ourselves] treasures in heaven” (Matt. 6:19-21), and that this work should be the driving force of our lives. The Apostle Paul says of these that they are “laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life.”—I Tim. 6:19

Greatness in Service

Key Verse: “But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister.”

—Matthew 20:26

THE ZEAL OF JESUS’ disciples was not always guided properly prior to their receiving the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

They asked the Master, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”—Matt. 18:1

Selected Scripture:
Matthew 18:1-4;
20:17-28

Jesus, seeing an opportunity to teach a vital lesson, called a child to him, and said that unless they would become as this child, they would not even enter

the kingdom of God, much less have a high position in it. What was it about this child that Jesus identified as so important to his followers? He says in verse 4, “Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” Humility, as personified in a child, must be the very foundation of the Christian character. Without it as a basis, no progress in any other graces can be attained.

A child manifests humility by being teachable and eager to learn. It does not have a conceited attitude, but depends on and appreciates of the love and help of others. It knows no deceitfulness, and views others with no preconceived notions or ideas. Children are innocent and guileless. As God’s children, we must also have these same aspects of humility in our character, if we are to have any part in the heavenly kingdom. So important is this that Jesus said, “Whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me.”—vs. 5

Shortly after this experience, as Jesus and his disciples made their way to Jerusalem, a similar experience is recorded. The mother of James and John requested that her two sons be granted positions on the right and left hand of Jesus in his kingdom.

Although he was careful not to criticize her for this request, he asked a more important question. Jesus asked whether these two were able to partake of the same cup of experiences—suffering and sacrifice—as he was drinking, and additionally whether they were able to follow his ‘baptism’ into sacrificial death. All those found worthy to be with him in his kingdom must do this. “Ye shall drink indeed of my cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with.” (Matt. 20:23) The position of sitting on the right hand or the left, was not for Jesus to give, but was for the Father in Heaven to give.

The position of greatness in the kingdom is not to be determined by fallen human principles. In society today, those who seem to have the most success are those who have the most pride, the most selfishness, the deepest commitment to step on and push aside any and all who might be obstacles in their path to greatness. They have the greatest desire to be served by others, and generally very little desire to render service to others themselves. To this attitude Jesus replies, “It shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant.”—vss. 26,27

Thus we learn that greatness is to be found by humility and service to God, the brethren, and one’s fellowman. Jesus said, “The Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.”—vs. 28

Forgiving Each Other

Key Verse: “For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”
—Matthew 6:14-15

Selected Scripture:
Matthew 18:21-35

JESUS’ MODEL PRAYER, as recorded in Matthew 6:9-13, contains the words, “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” At the conclusion of this familiar prayer, Jesus repeats this need to forgive. We are all sinners in Adam and we need God’s forgiveness. Through the merit of the sacrifice of Jesus, the true believer obtains forgiveness, for the sins of the past, and for the mistakes of the present.

The fact that we each have so much that has been forgiven by God would seem to imply that it should be easy to reflect this same forgiving attitude to those around us. Such is so often not the case. One of the most difficult lessons for many to learn is that of extending to others the love and mercy that has been so amply bestowed upon us. Our Key Verse points out that if we do not forgive others, then we should not expect to receive forgiveness from the Father.

Forgiveness is sometimes difficult because it embodies a love that rises to a level above those things that others may have done to cause us harm. Forgiveness is an expression of love that does not seek vindication against wrongs, but rather seeks to draw one back into a fuller fellowship with God and his people. Forgiveness actually forgets that sin was committed against us, in the way that God does: “For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”—Jer. 31:34

On one occasion, Peter asked Jesus how many times he should forgive one who sinned against him, suggestion to the Lord that

perhaps seven times would be more than enough. Jesus said otherwise, that he should forgive even “until seventy times seven.” (Matt. 18:22) In other words, forgiveness should not have a limit, just as God has not limited his forgiveness of our trespasses.

After Peter’s question, Jesus gave a parable to illustrate the lesson of forgiveness. (Matt. 18:23-35) In the parable, a king began to take account of his servants. One was brought to him who owed a very large sum of money. This servant begged that the king forgive him his debt. The king was moved with compassion and did so. The servant then met a fellow servant who owed him a small amount of money; laying his hands on him violently he demanded full payment immediately. The fellow servant similarly asked for forgiveness, even falling down at the feet of the first servant. However, the servant would not forgive and had him thrown in prison. The king found out what happened, and was extremely angry, calling him a wicked servant and wondering how he could not have compassion toward his fellowservant after he himself had been forgiven his debt. “In anger his lord delivered him to the jailers, till he should pay all his debt.”—Matt. 18:32-34, *RSV*

The lesson from Jesus’ parable is for each of us to be forgiving in our dealings with others, especially our fellow servants, our brethren. “So likewise shall my Heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses.”—Matt. 18:35

Good News for Everyone

Key Verse: “The times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent: Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.”
—Acts 17:30, 31

DURING THE APOSTLE Paul’s second missionary journey he was forced to make a stop in Athens, and saw that the city was steeped in idolatry, superstition, and philosophy. (Acts 17:16) Paul preached the Gospel message in the marketplace. On one occasion he encountered Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, who opposed his teachings. They took him before the supreme court of Athens—the Areopagus on Mars Hill—where Paul had to defend himself against the contention that he was preaching a new God.

Selected Scripture:
Acts 17:22-34

Paul complimented the religious inclinations of the Athenians as a good thing. He specifically pointed to one of their altars that had been erected: “**TO THE UNKNOWN GOD.**” (Acts 17:23) He declared that this god whom they were ignorantly worshipping was not a new god, but the true God, and began to tell them about him and his plan. Paul began his defense by stating that the true God does not dwell in man-made temples, nor is he represented by idols made with hands. On the contrary, it is God who made all things, and gives life and breath to all. He further stated that all human creation originates from the same blood through Adam, and all the bounds of the earth’s habitations were of God’s design, including the times and seasons. Paul states that God is still easily accessible by those desirous of seeking him, and is not far from any of us. (Acts 17:27) He is our Creator, our lifegiver, “For in him we live, and move, and have our being.” (vs. 28) Hence, since we are his creation, formed in

his own image, we should not expect him to be found in the likeness of stone or metal images.

Paul pointed out that in previous ages, ignorance of these truths could be excused, but no longer. Jesus had come, bringing the message of salvation with him. Paul continues to point out that the attitude of sincere repentance is of much more importance than worship of any idol. Since Paul was being judged, he pointed his listeners to a more important judgment, saying that a time of judgment upon the world will come—not a doomsday, but a judgment “in righteousness.”—Acts 17:31

This will be the great Judgment Day period of Christ’s Kingdom, when all the world will learn righteousness. For this to take place, it will require the raising of all those asleep in death. Jesus said, “An hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; those who did the good [deeds] to a resurrection of life; those who committed the evil [deeds] to a resurrection of judgment.”—John 5:28,29, *New American Standard Translation*

The assurance that this will take place lies in the fact that Jesus himself was raised from the dead by the mighty power of God. Many voiced their objections to the teaching of a resurrection of the dead, but others believed, including Dionysius, one of the supreme court Judges.—Acts 17:32-34

The Peace of God

“Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee: because he trusteth in thee.”

—Isaiah 26:3

OFTEN WE MAY WISH to change the circumstances of our lives, thinking that in this way we could serve the Lord better. Even the Apostle Paul had thoughts along this line, but he learned that the Lord’s way for him

was best. At the time of his conversion he was blinded by the light which shone “above the brightness of the sun.” (Acts 9:3; 26:13) Later, when visited by Ananias, his sight was partially restored, but he did not regain his normal vision, and was afflicted with this handicap for the remainder of his life. Paul refers to this as a “thorn in the flesh.”—II Cor. 12:7

GRACE SUFFICIENT

It was natural for Paul to reason that he could serve the Lord more efficiently if he had better eyesight, so he made it a matter of special prayer. He besought the Lord three times to have this thorn in the flesh removed, but the Lord’s answer to the apostle was, “My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness.” (II Cor. 12:9) Paul’s heart responded to this answer, and he wrote, “Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.”

In reasoning on this matter, Paul concluded that if he did not have this affliction he might be “exalted above measure” (II Cor. 12:7), and thus be inclined to trust in his own strength and abilities rather than in the Lord’s. And herein is the reason for many of the experiences and circumstances which the Lord permits to come into our lives. He wants us to realize that every victory of faith is his victory, and that our every success and accomplishment should be

accredited to him. It is so easy to forget that he is fighting our battles for us in the narrow way; so in his wisdom and mercy he allows conditions to be such that we are continually reminded of our need of him.

OUR 'THORN IN THE FLESH'

The 'thorn in the flesh' which buffets us may be one or more of a number of things which our faulty judgment might think should be changed. With some, for example, it may be environment. We may be the only one in our family that is rejoicing in the light of the present truth and running in the narrow way toward the prize of the High Calling of God in Christ Jesus. We may think, "If I could only enjoy the fellowship of someone right in my own home, how grand that would be, and how much better progress I could make in developing the fruits and graces of the Holy Spirit!"

We may make this a matter of prayer, perhaps even more than the three times that Paul prayed for better eyesight, only to get the same answer, 'My grace is sufficient for thee'—"My presence shall go with thee."(Exod. 33:14) God wants us to appreciate his fellowship more, and to lean more confidently upon him. If we can learn to do this, he will be to us as the choicest of friends, or as one that keepeth closer than a brother or a mother, or any other human association we could possibly possess. He will be a friend who will overlook our shortcomings, and will give us strength in our weaknesses, as God promised Moses. He will be an ever present help in our every trial, and will share our every joy. He will give us peace, quietness, and confidence, and will be our shield and exceeding great reward.

QUIETNESS AND CONFIDENCE

We may not only be without fellowship with members of our own family, but they may even oppose us in our service to the Lord. From the natural standpoint, this could but lead to turmoil of heart,

and to anxiety and sorrow. How our flesh would like to change a situation of this kind, that we might enjoy peace and quietness at least in our own home! Let us remember, though, that this is but another circumstance in which the Lord will fight for us, and that we can hold our peace. We will find that in this, as in every other circumstance of life, strength will be found in “quietness and in confidence” (Isa. 30:15)—not confidence in our own ability to weather the opposing gales, but confidence that the Lord is able to make his grace abound toward us at all times and in all things.—II Cor. 9:8.

A Christian seldom enjoys a peace resulting from tranquillity of circumstances. Usually the storms of life are raging, with tempests high on sea and land. These tempests may stem from one or more of many causes. Ill health may disturb our peace of heart. In such an event the flesh is quick to say that probably the Lord has forsaken us. The human mind is ready to fill the role of a ‘Job’s Comforter’, and tries to persuade us that God has turned his back on us. But Job said to his accusers of God, “Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him.”—Job 13:15

Nor does this peace of God necessarily give way to turmoil. We know that we have entered into a covenant with the Lord by sacrifice—the sacrifice of the flesh. We know, therefore, that our outward man must perish before we can enter into and enjoy our house from heaven. Faith in God and in this part of his will and plan, therefore, should give us peace. Whether it be the trial of sickness, or some other trial, we should accept it as evidence of the Lord’s love, and depending on his promise to supply all our needs, rejoice in his blessed assurance, “My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness.”—II Cor. 12:9

NEW CREATURES SECURE IN HIM

As followers of the Master—New Creatures in Christ Jesus (II Cor. 5:17)—we should never lose sight of the fact that the Heavenly

Father's care, his protection, his strength that is made perfect in our weakness, and the final victory which he has promised to give us through Christ, are all of a spiritual character. It is as New Creatures that he keeps us from falling. It is the new mind that dwells in the secret place of his love. He is a rock and fortress to the inner man which, because of the bounties of his grace, is being renewed day by day. Therefore, by having our minds on the Lord, we can have perfect peace.

This being true, it should matter little just how our flesh may fare, or what the natural circumstances of our lives may be. All that should really concern us should be—and in this we can always rejoice—that God is able to hold us in the hollow of his hand as New Creatures regardless of the opposing forces with which we may be surrounded. He can open the 'Red Sea' before us, as he did for Israel, so that we may 'go forward' safely in the doing of his will. With his love, and the love of Christ, overshadowing us, nothing can pluck us out of their hands. Paul was persuaded of this, and we can be also, and in this assurance we can have peace.

WHO SHALL SEPARATE US?

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."—Rom. 8:35-39

'Shall tribulation?' No! Divine wisdom has decreed that we need tribulation to prove and develop us. 'Or distress?' Of course not! We do not expect to be at ease while walking in the narrow way. 'Or

persecution?’ Again the answer is, No! For we will remember the Master’s words telling of the blessedness of those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, and the promise that theirs is the kingdom of heaven.—Matt. 5:10

‘Or famine?’ Paul learned to suffer want, and therein to be content, and so should we.

‘Or nakedness?’ There may be times when we could wish for better clothes to wear, but will remember that to be clothed with a meek and quiet spirit is far better, for we might possess the richest of material clothing, and yet not enjoy peace and quietness of heart and soul.

‘Or peril?’ No! For regardless of how perilous the storms of life may be, we will rest quietly in the Lord. As the little bird that builds its nest on the slender branch overhanging a cataract, does not fear, so we will remember that underneath us as New Creatures in Christ Jesus are the everlasting arms of Divine care which will ever hold us in the love of God.

‘Or sword?’ We know that the enemies of the New Creature are fighting desperately to overthrow us, to break down our courage and confidence, to take us away from our Heavenly Father’s love, but we will not fear. Instead, with the protection of the ‘armor of light’ on the right hand and on the left, we will ‘go forward’ in the strife, following the commands of the Captain of our Salvation. Doing this, no matter how fiercely the battle may rage about us, we will remain at peace, knowing that victory is assured.

“KILLED ALL THE DAY LONG”

Quoting from Psalm 44:22, Paul continues, “For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.” (Rom. 8:36) How much this is in keeping with our covenant of sacrifice! Our Master, in whose footsteps we are walking, was also

brought as a “lamb to the slaughter” (Isa. 53:7), and how honored we are to share this experience with him. This being true, the sufferings which result from our being planted together in the likeness of his death should increase our faith, confidence, and peace. These should abound as our sufferings continue, as Paul expresses it, ‘In all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us’.

‘For I am persuaded’, the Apostle continues. He was not persuaded that the Lord would protect him from trial, nor prevent his enemies from attacking him. No, he expected tribulation. He knew that he must endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. He knew that Satan would buffet him, and that he would be at enmity with the world. He knew that he would need constantly to struggle to keep his own body under, “and bring it into subjection.” (I Cor. 9:27) But he was persuaded that in all these things the Lord would be to him an ever present source of strength, and in this assurance he enjoyed peace, the “peace of God, which passeth all understanding.”—Phil. 4:7

CAN ANYTHING INTERFERE?

Paul identifies many of the things which, from the human standpoint, might well pluck us out of the loving hand of God; such, for example, as death. Death is the world’s greatest enemy, one which disturbs the peace of every family when it strikes. But we are assured of victory over death, and certainly it cannot separate us from the love of God. Not that we are spared from death, for actually our covenant with the Lord calls for death. We are dying with Christ—sacrificially. Yes, “dying, and, behold, we live.” (II Cor. 6:9) We have been raised up to walk in newness of life in Christ, and in this vantage point of Divine love there can no evil befall us.

‘Nor life’. One of the greatest dangers to the New Creature is an abundance of material good things such as health, prosperity, and friends. To the natural man these constitute the joy of living, or

'life', as the apostle puts it. Let us remember, however, that as New Creatures, our life does not consist of the abundance of the things which we possess, and remembering this, keep close to the Lord, looking to him for strength lest the allurements of ease and plenty pluck us out of his hand and we fall from our steadfastness.

'Nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers'. These are the fallen angels, the 'principalities' and the 'powers' and the 'rulers of the darkness of this world,' which Paul also speaks of in Ephesians 6:12, and identifies as among our most formidable enemies. It is against these that we 'wrestle', yet we need not fear, for the Lord fights for us in that he has provided an armor which, if we put it on and keep it on, the 'wiles of the devil' will not be able to harm us.—Eph. 6:11

'Nor things present, nor things to come'. The Lord, through Moses, promised his people of old that as their days, so should their strength be. (Deut. 33:25) We know that the Lord is fighting for us today, that he is not permitting any of our enemies to overwhelm us; and we should also trust him for the future; for the apostle assures us that just as things 'present' cannot separate us from the love of God, neither will 'things to come' be permitted to do so. What a promise, and how sweet is the peace which results when in confidence we lay hold upon it!

'Nor height, nor depth'—that is, exaltation or humiliation. Either of these extremes might easily separate us from Divine love. Exaltation, either in the Lord's service or in business, or among our friends, could be dangerous to the New Creature, but not if we remember who we are and the glorious prize of the High Calling for which we are running. The Lord's protection against this danger may be in permitting us to experience the 'depth'—that is, to be humbled through reverses of one sort or another in order that we may realize that regardless of our position in life, it is by his permission, and that nothing which is really good for us as New Creatures will he withhold.

‘Nor any other creature’. Paul gives us a very complete cross section of Christian experience, but in case he overlooked one or more of the influences—the ‘creatures’ which war against our new minds in an effort to separate us from the Lord and to destroy our peace in him—he makes this blanket statement to assure us that nothing whatever is too small or too great for God to notice as he spreads over us the protection of his mighty power. We are assured that nothing will be able to ‘separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord’. Being confident of this, we can have peace.

GOD IS FOR US

‘What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us?’ or as *Wilson’s Emphatic Diaglott* puts it, “**since** God **is** for us ...” Yes, he **is** for us, and it is because he fights for us that we can have peace—‘the peace of God, which passeth all [human] understanding’. (Rom. 8:31; Phil. 4:7) It is this peace that keeps our hearts and minds through Christ Jesus our Lord.

The peace of God is the same peace which God possesses, the peace that results from his knowledge that nothing can happen in his whole vast universe except as he wills or permits it. He is neither anxious about the present, nor fearful of the future; and his peace can be ours, for as members of his family he has assured us that all the glorious attributes of his character are enlisted for our protection and care as New Creatures in Christ Jesus.

With this ‘blessed assurance’ we can ‘go forward’ in our march toward the heavenly Canaan with absolute confidence that if in each step of the way we obey him, no seas of trouble can drown us, nor will he permit any of the storms of life to overwhelm us. He has promised to guide us, to hold us, to keep us, to fight for us, and to give us strength. What more could we ask?

It remains only for us to wait on him in quietness and in confidence and claim his peace, knowing that whatever our need may be he

will “bring it to pass.” (Ps. 37:5) All we have to do is to ‘stand still’ in the sense of not being agitated no matter what the circumstances may be; and when he gives the command to ‘go forward’, to obey knowing that he will lead the way and give victory to all who have their minds stayed on him, rewarding us with eternal peace.

Dawn Bible Students Association

The Plan of God in the Book of Genesis—Part 19

Two Brothers Meet

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

VERSES 1-7 “And Jacob lifted up his eyes, and looked, and, behold, Esau came, and with him four hundred men. And he divided the children unto Leah, and unto Rachel, and unto the two handmaids. “And he put the handmaids and their children foremost, and Leah and her children after, and Rachel and Joseph hindermost. “And he passed over before them, and bowed himself to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother. “And Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him: and they wept. “And he lifted up his eyes, and saw the women and the children; and said, Who are those with thee? And he said, The children which God hath graciously given thy servant. “Then the handmaidens came near, they and their children, and they bowed themselves. “And Leah also with her children came near, and bowed themselves: and after came Joseph near and Rachel, and they bowed themselves.”

Regardless of what Esau originally had in mind by journeying with four hundred men to meet Jacob, by the time they actually did meet he displayed no anger, nor did he so much as refer to what had occurred twenty years before. All of this was in the Lord’s providence, and who can say that the sending of presents to Esau, and Jacob’s earnest praying did not have much to do with this kindly reception.

It is possible that the ‘angels of God’ who met Jacob soon after he parted from Laban at Mount Gilead, may have given him detailed instructions as to how to prepare Esau for this meeting. This may have been the Lord’s way of answering Jacob’s prayer for deliverance from the hand of Esau. Esau was not destroyed, but reformed.

Ways of escape for God’s people are usually outlined in advance of their prayers as seems to have been the case with Jacob. When we seek special blessings of wisdom and strength from the Lord we usually find the answers to our prayers already recorded in his Word, indicating that the Lord knew our needs in advance, and made provision for them.

VERSES 8-18 “And he said, What meanest thou by all this drove which I met? And he said, These are to find grace in the sight of my lord.

“And Esau said, I have enough, my brother; keep that thou hast unto thyself.

“And Jacob said, Nay, I pray thee, if now I have found grace in thy sight, then receive my present at my hand: for therefore I have seen thy face, as though I had seen the face of God, and thou wast pleased with me.

“Take, I pray thee, my blessing that is brought to thee; because God hath dealt graciously with me, and because I have enough. And he urged him, and he took it.

“And he said, Let us take our journey, and let us go, and I will go before thee.

“And he said unto him, My lord knoweth that the children are tender, and the flocks and herds with young are with me: and if men should overdrive them one day, all the flock will die.

“Let my lord, I pray thee, pass over before his servant: and I will lead on softly, according as the cattle that goeth before me and the children be able to endure, until I come unto my lord unto Seir.

“And Esau said, Let me now leave with thee some of the folk that are with me. And he said, What needeth it? let me find grace in the sight of my lord.

“So Esau returned that day on his way unto Seir.

“And Jacob journeyed to Succoth, and built him an house, and made booths for his cattle: therefore the name of the place is called Succoth.

“And Jacob came to Shalem, a city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan, when he came from Padan-arem; and pitched his tent before the city.”

For the time being, Shalem, a city of Shechem, marked the end of Jacob’s journey from Padan-aram, the home of Laban, his father-in-law. It was a distance of approximately 500 miles. He pitched his tent in front of Shalem, and bought there a field and erected an altar. Apparently he felt that another important episode in his life had reached a successful conclusion, so he commemorated it by the erection of an altar.

VERSES 19,20 “And he bought a parcel of a field, where he had spread his tent, at the hand of the children of Hamor, Shechem’s father, for a hundred pieces of money.

“And he erected there an altar, and called it El-elohe-Israel.”

He called the altar El-elohe-Israel, that is, “God, the God of Israel.” Thus again we find the patriarch acknowledging his faith in God, and expressing particularly his appreciation for the deliverance from the hand of Esau which had just been wrought. Recognition of this is suggested by the use of his new name, Israel, in connection with the altar. He had prevailed with God, and God had prevailed for him, and this great victory which God had given to him was something worthy of being commemorated.

Are We Willing?

WE ARE STARTING another new year—1999, the close of the 20th century. As Christians, it is always appropriate to reflect on the matter of our standing before the Lord, and to rejoice in the blessings he so richly bestows upon us from day to day. Thoughts of this sort should be uppermost in our minds at all times, and not merely at the beginning of a year—albeit the close of a century—although these milestones do afford an excellent opportunity for every follower of the Master to take stock of his spiritual assets and resolve to be more faithful in learning and doing the Lord's will.

That the opening of another year finds us still standing fast, appreciating the truth, and in full accord with the Divine appointments by which he has kept us from falling, should surely call forth our thanks to God. How appropriate it is for all of us to check back over the past year to see if the above has been true in our own experiences!

“Do we really love the Lord, the truth, and the brethren, more than a year ago?

“Are we willing—for the love of the truth—to sacrifice the flesh and its interests more fully than in the past?

“Are we willing to take humbly the chastenings which our Heavenly Father, in his wisdom and love, sees fit to permit?

“Are we willing, in every way, to suffer humbly for righteousness' sake when our efforts to serve seem to be misunderstood?”

If we can answer “Yes” to these questions it is because our confidence in the Lord and in his sustaining grace to help in our

every time of need is very strong. It is only the Lord who is able to keep us from falling, and to present us faultless “before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy.”—Jude 24

What wonderful peace of heart and mind we can enjoy as we lay hold upon this reassuring thought! Just as the apostle could say, “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me” (Phil. 4:13), so we too can go forward in the narrow way, knowing that no matter how difficult the journey, the Lord will go with us and help us over all the rough places.

“Are we willing—for the love of the truth to sacrifice the flesh and its interests more fully than in the past?” Indeed this is a heart-searching question. As New Creatures we should be quite willing to sacrifice the flesh, but the flesh rebels against the idea of being sacrificed; so we have a conflict.

Christian sacrifice was pictured in the type of Israel’s Tabernacle rituals by the burning of animals, and this teaches that we are to yield our bodies a “living sacrifice.” (Rom. 12:1) We should expect, therefore, that if we are faithful in sacrificing our flesh there will be suffering involved, but for the New Creature this should be a cause for rejoicing—rejoicing that we have this privilege of helping to “fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ.”—Col. 1:24

“Are we willing to take humbly the chastenings which our Heavenly Father, in his wisdom and love, sees fit to permit?” It is well if we can recognize when the Lord is chastening us, and endeavor to learn the needed lessons. The fact that the Lord does discipline us should be a great encouragement, for, as the apostle explains, it is an evidence of his love. (Heb. 12:6) To be chastened by the Lord is an evidence that he is caring for us—it is one of the Divine appointments which keeps us from falling.

How favored are the Lord’s people! The world has little or nothing upon which to build hopes for 1999, or any other year. We do not, of course, know much about the details of the experiences which

will be ours in the weeks and months ahead, but we do know that it will be a year of victory for each one of us in proportion to our faith in the Lord, and our faithfulness in doing his will.

It will be a wonderful year for sacrificing our flesh, if we want to have it so. It will be a happy year of rejoicing in the Lord if we keep ourselves in his love and in harmony with all the appointments by which he keeps us from falling.

If, at the beginning of each day, the question uppermost in our minds is: “What shall I render unto the Lord for all his benefits toward me?” (Ps. 116:12), and apply the answer the Scriptures supply—by fulfilling our vows of sacrifice—our joy in the Lord will be rich, and full, and glorious!

Dawn Bible Students Association

“Time to Seek the LORD”

“Sow to yourselves in righteousness, reap in mercy; break up your fallow ground: for it is time to seek the LORD.”
—Hosea 10:12

THESE WORDS WERE spoken to Israel, which was then divided into two camps: the ten-tribe kingdom referred to as Israel, and the two-tribe kingdom known as Judah. While the prophecy of Hosea has a particular application to those who, in name only, are

represented by the house of Israel, the words of our text are fitting and timely to all the Lord’s consecrated children at this end of the age; for truly, in the time remaining of our lives, we should strain every nerve in seeking the Lord and his favor. This same lesson is conveyed to us by the Apostle Peter where he says:

“For as much then as Christ hath suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves likewise with the same mind: for he that hath suffered in the flesh hath ceased from sin; that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh to the lusts of men, but to the will of God. For the time past of our life may suffice us to have wrought the will of the Gentiles, when we walked in lasciviousness, lusts, excess of wine, revellings, banquetings, and abominable idolatries.”—I Pet. 4:1-3

IN THE WORLD

We cannot live the rest of our time following the excesses of the world, nor emulating its spirit of bitterness and strife in any degree whatsoever. Before entering this consecrated life to suffer in the flesh with Christ, we, in a measure, partook of this world’s spirit. Perhaps we were inclined toward merrymaking; or seeking our own comforts and the satisfying of our own desires; or were involved with politics, philosophy, or false religion. We may have

had animosity against certain ones or groups. Possibly we were jealous.

In some, or in all, of these ways we were tainted with the corruption that is in the world because of sin. This time of our lives, when we were yet in the “horrible pit” and the “miry clay,” demonstrated to us the vanity and contemptibleness of living under the influence of this world’s spirit. (Ps. 40:2) That manner of living is in the past and we have the precious and priceless opportunity of doing the will of our Father who is in heaven.

ARMED WITH THE MIND OF CHRIST

The privilege of serving the Lord calls for preparation, as the Apostle Peter says, “Arm yourselves likewise with the same mind [the mind of Christ].” (I Pet. 4:1) We are to ‘arm’ ourselves with the knowledge that Christ, our forerunner, suffered in the flesh; hence we must suffer also. We are also to ‘arm’ ourselves with the knowledge that each of us “should live the rest of his time ... to the will of God.” (vs. 2) It seems that suffering and time are two elements that we should consider in this good warfare.

We are reminded frequently in the Scriptures concerning the sufferings that would be the portion of the saints. It was necessary for our Lord to suffer and then to enter into his glory. His suffering was pictured in Israel’s Tabernacle sacrifices on the Day of Atonement, where a bullock was slain and its fat burned upon the brazen altar, while the body of that animal was taken without the camp and burned. The burning ‘without the camp’ showed how the world viewed our Lord’s sacrifice—it was a reproach to them and a stench to their nostrils. (Lev. 16:25,27) Also, as the brazen serpent was lifted up in the wilderness by Moses, so our Lord was to be ‘lifted up’. (Num. 21:9; II Kings 18:4; John 3:14) It was prophesied of Jesus that he would be “forsaken” by his God and that he would be a “reproach of men, and despised of the people.” (Ps. 22:1,6,7) He was to be “wounded for our transgressions,” “bruised for our

iniquities,” and the “chastisement of our peace” was to be upon him.— Isa. 53:5

As Christ suffered in the flesh, even so the church is to “fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ.” (Col. 1:24) At the very beginning of our discipleship we are told, “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.” (Matt. 16:24) As many as are “baptized into Jesus Christ” are “baptized into his death.” We are “planted together in the likeness of his death, ... that our old man” might be “crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin.” (Rom. 6:3-6) We are forewarned also that “all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.” (II Tim. 3:12) So, with these and many other scriptures we should ‘arm’ ourselves with the knowledge that suffering and self-denial lie ahead of us, for it is written “that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God.”—Acts 14:22

TIME IS SHORT

Time is an element we do well to take into consideration if we hope ultimately to reach the heavenly city. We live in the present. The future, except for the prophecies of the Scriptures, is veiled and unknown to us. The past quickly fades from our imperfect minds, and only certain features or occurrences are remembered. For this reason, it is easy to fail to get the proper perspective of our consecrated lifetime.

It is because the fallen human race does not view life from the proper perspective that they pursue the vanities of this life. They seek to eke out of the present all the excitement and happiness they can, and all the while shun the future. If they could get the proper viewpoint of this life they would quickly conclude with the wise man that “all is vanity.” Moreover, they would seek to enrich their lives with more substantial hopes and loftier ambitions, and they

would find that the whole duty of man is to “fear God, and keep his commandments.”—Eccles. 12:8,13

But we are not of this world, nor do we have its viewpoint. There is danger, however, that we might not have the proper perspective of our Christian life. Hence our prayer should be, as was David’s, “Lord, make me to know mine end, and the measure of my days, what it is; that I may know what time I have here.” (Ps. 39:4, *Marginal Translation*) We do not understand this to mean that David desired to know the exact date of his death, but rather that he was considering the end of life’s walk and focusing his attention upon serving and pleasing the Lord. Psalm 90:12, has the same message: “So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.”

The Apostle Paul desired that all those consecrated to God should have the proper perspective, and to realize that the time applying to their lives was limited. He wrote, “This I say, brethren, the time [of life] is short: it remaineth, that both they that have wives be as though they had none; and they that weep, as though they wept not; and they that rejoice, as though they rejoiced not; and they that buy, as though they possessed not; and they that use this world, as not abusing it: for the fashion of this world passeth away.”—I Cor. 7:29-31

The opportunity to serve the Lord is very short. We can deduct from the brief span of life the years before we came to a knowledge of the truth and consecrated ourselves to the service of God, as well as the time expended in providing things needful for the temporal wants of ourselves and those dependent upon us. To all of this, add the necessary hours spent in eating and sleeping, and even with the greatest economy of time, how little is left!

NO WASTE OF TIME

Since we have no time to waste, how should we conduct ourselves in order to serve and please the Lord? The Apostle Paul counsels that ‘they that have wives be as though they had none’. (vs. 29) He did not mean to imply that marital relationships should be annulled among the consecrated, but rather, his exhortation was for them to touch as lightly as possible all earthly relationships, seeking to set their affections upon heavenly things. The service of God should not compete with earthly cares and responsibilities. We can successfully concentrate upon one thing at a time, so choose we must. Paul said, “This one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the High Calling of God in Christ Jesus.”—Phil. 3:13,14

The apostle further counsels that those who ‘weep’ be ‘as though they wept not’; and they that ‘rejoice’, as though they ‘rejoiced not’; and they that ‘buy’, as though they ‘possessed not’. (I Cor. 7:30) We must carry on the work of the church so perseveringly that none know we had either rejoiced or sorrowed. We may always rejoice in the Spirit because a heavenly joy is set before us. Also, we realize that in due time the “ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads.”—Isa. 35:10

Those who possess houses and lands, or riches of any earthly nature—those who have consecrated their all to the Lord—should remember that these possessions are not really theirs, but belong to the Lord. They must give an account to the Lord for their stewardship. If thoroughly awake to the fact that every possession is the Lord’s and not their own, it would free us from many snares. This is spoken of in I Timothy 6:10: “Which while some coveted after, they have been seduced from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.”—*Marginal Translation*

REDEEMING THE TIME

With the proper perspective on the shortness of life's span, it becomes easier to 'use this world, as not abusing it', for we realize the 'fashion of this world passeth away'. (I Cor. 7:31) We have a new goal before us and should seek at every cost to make our calling and election sure. While we are busy providing things honest (II Cor. 8:21), we must remember that it is 'time to seek the Lord'.

Because the time in which 'to seek the Lord' is limited, the Apostle Paul was not remiss in instructing what would be the wise course for us to pursue. His words are, "Redeeming the time, because the days are evil." (Eph. 5:16) He also writes, "Walk in wisdom toward them that are without, redeeming the time." (Col. 4:5) This seems to signify buying back the time, as though the time were already mortgaged. And this is so. The cares of this life—its necessities, the customs of this world, our fallen tendencies—would, if permitted, absorb every hour of our time, whereas, our life, our all, is dedicated to the King of kings, and the Lord of Lords.

How do we obtain time for study or witnessing? We must buy back the time that we had previously spent for worldly things. No longer will we take time to pamper fallen appetites and tendencies; rather, the interests of the New Creature, and the service of the Lord will come first.—Eph. 5:15,16

THE LAST DAYS

Furthermore, we see the evidence that the disolution of the world is taking place. Fear and uncertainty cover the earth; and the floodwaters of human selfishness and hatred are constantly rising. God will intervene when "the servants of our God" are sealed "in their foreheads."—Rev. 7:3

While the final phase of trouble is being held back by Divine power, we should especially appreciate this extended opportunity to "make [our] calling and election sure," and account that for us "the

longsuffering of our Lord is salvation.” (II Pet. 1:10; 3:15) It becomes increasingly necessary to ‘redeem the time’ in devoting ourselves more fully to the Lord and his service. We need to hasten our steps toward the heavenly city. The knowledge of the fact that our deliverance “draweth nigh,” should spur us on to greater zeal and faithfulness.—Luke 21:28

WELL DOING

The Christian test is not simply of ‘well doing’, but “patient continuance in well doing.” (Rom. 2:7) How often we find those who ‘endure’ for a while; who ‘run well’ for a while; who ‘suffer’ for a while; who ‘watch and pray’ for a while; who ‘rejoice’ for a while, who are ‘faithful’ for a while. But soon time begins to show its effects in their lives. Gradually, almost imperceptibly, these begin to slacken in their running for the prize; gradually they draw back from suffering and sacrifice—not deliberately—but with seemingly justifiable reasons; gradually they find less time for prayer and much less for watching the Lord’s hand in their lives, or for watching the times and seasons, or for even watching themselves; gradually the heavenly joy is diminished, and perhaps supplanted with some human happiness which makes the change less noticeable. Thus gradually their faithfulness is lessened, and they become “weary in well doing.”—Gal. 6:9

Because some have not ‘armed’ their minds to meet the tests that time puts upon them, they are soon defeated in their Christian warfare. They fail to get the proper perspective of this present life, and also fail to focus their minds upon the eternity of blessing promised to the faithful overcomers. Hence, before long, their conflicts and trials seem endless, the suffering too great, the opposition too strong, their efforts unavailing, and they faint in their minds. The Adversary is quick then to bring subtle temptations into the mind—pleasing allurements with a show of righteousness.

The Apostle Paul foresaw the danger in not being properly conscious of time—both the brevity of life and the ‘times and seasons’, so he wrote: “Knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light.” (Rom. 13:11,12) With our minds properly armed, it will not be so difficult to stand the test that time brings to bear upon all the followers of the Master. We will be fully awake to our glorious privileges, seeking with all our hearts to serve and please the Lord. We will be able to look at our trials and self-denials as light afflictions. Nor will they seem endless and unbearable, for the time is short—only as a moment when compared to the “eternal weight of glory.”—II Cor. 4:17

SOW IN RIGHTEOUSNESS

‘It is time to seek the Lord’, and as our text suggests, the proper course for us to pursue is to ‘sow’ to ourselves in ‘righteousness, reap in mercy’, and to ‘break up’ our ‘fallow ground’. None of the Lord’s followers can afford to sow otherwise, for “God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting.”—Gal. 6:7,8

But some may ask, “What will such a sowing to ourselves in righteousness mean?” It will mean that the Lord’s people will study the subject of justice continually, and daily put into practice the lessons inculcated in the Divine word. All the saints must be foes of sin. Wherever sin is, they must wage a warfare against it and see to it that in their hearts, at least, they are free from sin, that in their hearts they do not countenance sin, but oppose it. Sin should find no harboring place nor sympathy in their hearts. The Christian should heed the Apostle Paul’s counsel when he said, “Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest,

whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.”—Phil. 4:8

We are told to ‘break up’ the ‘fallow’ ground; that is, to till or cultivate our freshly plowed heart-soil. In this figure, the mind is likened to a newly-plowed field which has not been tilled or cultivated sufficiently for the planting of seed. We might think of this plowing of the heart-soil as representing or picturing our consecration—the complete turning over of our hearts from the service of sin to the service of righteousness. The old mind or disposition has been “buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.” (Rom. 6:4) The ‘newness of life’ becomes ours to develop, to cultivate, and to sow with righteousness.

There is danger in not cultivating or properly planting, the ‘fallow’ soil of our hearts. Where we fail to cultivate and plant righteousness, the Adversary is sure to take advantage of the dormant condition and plant evil thoughts and suggestions that, once they take root in the mind, spread rapidly, and to the injury and sorrow of the New Creature. Also, we will find the fleshly desires cropping up in the uncultivated corners of our heart-soil, absorbing our time, vitality, and attention, and decreasing the opportunity to glorify our Heavenly Father, by failing to bear “much fruit,” the fruit of the Spirit.—John 15:8

REAP IN LOVINGKINDNESS

The *Rotherham Translation* renders Hosea 10:12 as follows: “Reap ... at the bidding of lovingkindness.” This means we must first grow an abundant yield of love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness and temperance. Happy are we if we do these things, for then we will be able to receive “an hundredfold”

blessing in this life, notwithstanding the additional inheritance of “everlasting life.” (Matt. 19:29) How rich and blessed indeed is the life that is lived in conformity to the pattern exemplified in our Lord.

The greater our present sacrifices, the greater our spiritual rewards, both now and hereafter. The faithful will find that they can say with the wise man, “The blessing of the Lord, it maketh rich, and he addeth no sorrow with it.”—Prov. 10:22

When we come to the end of life’s journey, where the trials and tears will have their end, where every earthly tie will be broken, and with all of life’s possessions behind us, then will our past life of suffering and sacrifice which took place in ‘filling up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ’, appear to us a most wise and precious course! Having sown to the Spirit in our lifetime, our personal harvest will not be corruption, as the world’s, but life everlasting. We shall have accumulated great treasures in heaven and hence shall have ministered to us an abundant entrance “into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ,” to receive the “crown of glory that fadeth not away.”—II Pet. 1:11; I Pet. 5:4