

“Until He Come”

***“Thus saith the Lord
GOD; Remove the
diadem, and take off
the crown: ... it shall
be no more, until he
come whose right it
is; and I will give it
him.”
—Ezekiel 21:26, 27***

AS THE CHRISTIAN world prepares to observe another anniversary of our Lord’s birth, there is no peace on earth. Even though it is not a true anniversary, the reminder that people have of the message brought by an angel to shepherds in the hills of Judea, keeping watch over their flock by night, is brought to everyone’s attention again. The message was “behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of

David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.” (Luke 2:10,11) On that occasion there also was suddenly “with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.” (vss. 13,14) The one designated as the Prince of Peace had been born. Yet the kingly authority, taken away from Zedekiah, Israel’s last king, and to be given to him, would not be assumed until a future time.—Ezek. 21:26,27

During the long centuries of human sorrow and suffering referred to in the Bible as a nighttime which is eventually to terminate in a morning of joy (Ps. 30:5), a definite basis of hope for the coming new day was held forth in the promises of God to the patriarch Abraham. These comments were enlarged upon as they were repeated to his descendants by the holy prophets. The promise to Abraham was that through his “seed” “all the families of the earth” were to be blessed.—Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18

In Hebrews 11:10 we read that Abraham “looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God.” A city is used in the Bible to symbolize a government. A city ‘whose builder and maker is God’ would therefore be the Divine kingdom, or government, of promise. It is doubtful if Abraham understood all the implications of the wonderful promises God made to him, but evidently he did get the thought that the promised blessing of all people would come through the agencies of a

government in which his ‘seed’ would in some manner have a prominent part.

This thought is borne out in a deathbed prophecy uttered by Abraham’s grandson, Jacob, when he said concerning his son Judah, “Judah is a lion’s whelp: from the prey, my son, thou art gone up: he stooped down, he couched as a lion, and as an old lion; who shall rouse him up? The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be.” (Gen. 49:9,10) This prophecy was given while the Hebrew people were in Egypt, where the symbol of the regal right to rule was then a ‘couching’ lion. The clear implication of the prophecy is, therefore, that from the tribe of Judah there would come a great ruler, one who would establish peace—as implied by the title ‘Shiloh’—and fulfill the promises which God had made to Abraham.

Moses was raised up by the Lord to deliver the Hebrew people from Egyptian bondage, and through him the Lord gave the nation his Law. Faithfulness to that Law would have resulted not only in life for the people, but a wonderfully exalted position for the nation. Concerning this the Lord said, “If ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation.”—Exod. 19:5,6

This high position to be occupied by Israel as a priestly, or royal, nation was, as the Lord clearly indicated, conditional upon faithfulness to his covenant, and he gave the people every possible opportunity to be faithful, exercising great patience with their waywardness and backslidings. Under the leadership of Joshua, they were taken into the promised land, and, for several centuries after the death of Joshua, were virtually without a ruler except as God “raised up judges” to deliver them. (Judg. 2:16) As a result of their unfaithfulness, they fell prey to the aggressions of the surrounding nations.

Samuel was the last of these judges. While he was filling the office of judge, the Israelites clamored for a king. They wanted to be like the surrounding nations. The Lord yielded to this request, and Saul was anointed by Samuel to be their first king. Saul ruled well for a time, but

later proved unfaithful, and David was anointed to succeed him, although he did not do so until the death of Saul.

David was greatly beloved by the Lord, and to him was made a very enduring promise. It was that the right to rule would never be taken from his family—“Thine house and thy kingdom shall be established for ever before thee: thy throne shall be established for ever.” (II Sam. 7:16) Thus was the royal aspect concerning Abraham’s seed, which was to bless all nations, still further restricted. Not only was the great ruler to come from the tribe of Judah, but now from the family of David.

The Lord used the kingdom arrangements of Israel to be illustrative, or typical, of the real kingdom which would later be established in the hands of the promised Messiah. Thus we read concerning David’s son, Solomon, that he “sat on the throne of the Lord as king instead of David his father.” (I Chron. 29:23) This was true of all the successive kings in David’s line. Some of them were faithful to the Lord, and some were not; but, regardless, the Lord did not wrest the kingdom from David’s line.

This typical kingdom arrangement continued until the days of King Zedekiah, who was one of several successive wicked kings who occupied the throne of the Lord. It turned out that he was the last; for it was concerning him that the Lord caused the Prophet Ezekiel to write, “Thou, profane wicked prince of Israel, whose day is come, when iniquity shall have an end, Thus saith the Lord GOD; Remove the diadem, and take off the crown: this shall not be the same: exalt him that is low, and abase him that is high. I will overturn, overturn, overturn, it: and it shall be no more, until he come whose right it is; and I will give it him.”—Ezek. 21:25-27

There is great finality in the statement, ‘Whose day is come, when iniquity shall have an end,’ and also an indication that the day which is said to have come had been foretold, and indeed it had. When God entered into covenant relationship with Israel through the Law administered to Moses, he promised to care for them and bless them if they were faithful to him. But he also warned them of dire punishments if they were unfaithful.

One of these warnings is recorded in Leviticus 26:17-28. Here various punishments are mentioned which evidently refer to their periods of captivity to the Moabites, Midianites, Philistines, and others. After warning of these minor periods of punishment, the Lord declares, “And

if ye will not for all this hearken unto me, ... [then] I, will chastise you seven times for your sins.” This ‘seven times’ of additional punishment is mentioned four times.

It is generally agreed by students of prophecy that each of the times mentioned in this passage is equivalent to a Jewish year of 360 days. In Ezekiel 4:5-8, the Lord lays down a rule for computing these prophetic time measurements in which he says that each day should be counted for a year. Seven periods, or times, of 360 days would be 2,520 days. With each day representing a year, this would be a period of 2,520 years.

If, as our text indicates, this final period of punishment upon Israel began when their last king, Zedekiah, was overthrown, it would mean that not until 2,520 years from then could they expect any marked degree of Divine favor leading to their liberation as a people. At the time of Zedekiah’s overthrow, the nation was taken captive to Babylon, and, although permitted to return to their own land seventy years later, never did regain national independence. Their kingdom, the typical kingdom of the Lord, had come to an end, and while Ezekiel promised that it was only, ‘until he come whose right it is,’ he explains that even then it would ‘not be the same.’

THE ROYAL MAJESTY APPEARS

More than six hundred years after the last Jewish king was overthrown, Jesus came. John the Baptist announced his presence, saying, “The kingdom of heaven is at hand.” A more correct translation says, “The royal majesty of the heavens has approached.” (Matt. 3:2, *Wilson’s Emphatic Diaglott*) And indeed Jesus was the royal One whom the God of heaven had promised. He was the “seed” of Abraham. (Gal. 3:16) He was the ‘Shiloh’ who was to come from the tribe of Judah. (Gen. 49:10) He was the seed of David who was to occupy the “throne of David” forever.—Isa. 9:7

Jesus’ disciples had accepted him as the promised Messiah, “The Prince of Peace” (Isa. 9:6), the great King who was to rule “from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth.” (Ps. 72:8) They believed that he would establish his government in Judea, and do it right away. We are not to suppose that they understood fully all that the promised kingdom of the Lord would mean to Israel and to the world. Their chief concern at the time was probably the liberation of their nation

from bondage to the Roman Empire; for they asked the resurrected Jesus, “Wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?”—that kingdom which was overthrown in the days of Zedekiah.—Acts 1:6

They seemed warranted in such a hope. Had not the Prophet Ezekiel said that their kingdom had been overthrown merely ‘until he come whose right it is’? And was not Jesus this One, the rightful One again to occupy David’s throne? Was not Jesus the One of whom it had been written, “Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this”?”—Isa. 9:7

What his disciples did not at first understand was that his coming to establish his kingdom would be his Second Advent, a return visit. Jesus made this clear in a parable. The record is that he spake this parable “because they thought that the kingdom of God should immediately appear.” (Luke 19:11) The parable was of a “certain nobleman” who went into a “far country to receive for himself a kingdom, and to return.”—vs.12

The reason Jesus related this parable at that time was that he had announced to his disciples that he was going into Jerusalem where his enemies were plotting to arrest him and have him put to death. He let them know that he expected to die, and was voluntarily allowing himself to be killed. They could not understand this. From their human way of reasoning they wondered how it would be possible for a dead king to establish a powerful kingdom and liberate their nation from its Roman overlords.

The parable of the ‘certain nobleman’ evidently helped them somewhat. From it, they gathered that Jesus was going away to a ‘far country’ and that the kingdom would not become a reality until he returned. To them it meant further waiting, they knew not how long. But, heavy of heart because of deferred hopes, they went to Jesus on the Mount of Olives just a few days before he was crucified, and they asked, “What shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?”—Matt. 24:3

In these questions the Greek word which is translated ‘coming,’ literally means ‘presence.’ The word which is translated ‘world’ is *aion*, which *Strong’s Bible Concordance* explains means ‘age.’

The disciples asked Jesus, What shall be the sign of your presence, when as the nobleman of the parable you return to establish your kingdom, and what will be the sign that the time has come for the end of the Gospel Age?

Jesus’ answer to these questions is most enlightening. Among the signs he outlined, which would give evidence of his Second Presence would be a time of “great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be.” This ‘tribulation,’ Jesus said, would be so severe that “except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved.”—Matt. 24:21,22

No one, unless inspired by God, could have foretold so accurately what is facing mankind today, and causing the hearts of the people everywhere to be filled with fear. The possibility of the human race being totally destroyed is now commonly spoken of by men of science, statesmen, and militarists. Luke’s report of Jesus’ reply to the disciples’ questions quotes Jesus as saying that there would be upon the earth “distress of nations, with perplexity;” and that “Men’s hearts [would be] failing them for fear.”—Luke 21:25,26

“TIMES OF THE GENTILES”

Especially significant in Luke’s report of the ‘signs’ which Jesus outlined to the disciples in answer to their questions pertaining to the time of his Second Presence and the completion of the Messianic purpose, is the statement, “Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled.” (Luke 21:24) ‘Jerusalem’ here stands for the Jewish polity and the people of the nation who were then under bondage to Rome.

They were already being ‘trodden down,’ that is, they were a subject nation, and had been, as we have seen, for more than six hundred years. Jesus said that this would continue ‘until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled.’ The Greek word translated times denotes a fixed period of time. It is undoubtedly that long period of 2,520 years of punishment upon the Jewish nation to which we have already referred. It began with the

overthrow of King Zedekiah, which was in 606 BC, and 2,520 years from then would bring us to AD 1914.

Jesus indicated that the end of the times of the Gentiles would bring about a changed status with respect to the Jewish people, and that this would be one of the signs of his presence. We note that it was as a direct result of the First World War, which began in 1914, that the Jewish people have regained their national independence. They are now no longer a people without a homeland, and without an independent government. They are no longer a subject people, trodden down by the Gentiles.

But there is another aspect of Jesus' prophecy which is equally important—the Gentile aspect. The Jewish nation was to be trodden down until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled. This would indicate that the time of Israel's national subjugation would be a period during which Gentile nations would be permitted to exercise an unhindered rulership, and by God's ordering. The Apostle Paul said, "The powers that be are ordained [ordered, *Marginal Translation*] of God."—Rom. 13:1

BEGAN WITH BABYLON

Paul evidently based his assertion on a statement which the Prophet Daniel, speaking for the Lord, made to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. It was during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar that Judah's last king, that 'wicked prince of Israel,' was overthrown and the nation taken captive into Babylon. This Gentile king had a dream in which he saw a humanlike image having a head of gold, breast and arms of silver, thighs of brass, legs of iron, and feet and toes of iron and clay mixed. In the dream the king saw a stone cut out of the mountain "without hands." This stone smote the image on its feet, causing it to fall, and grinding it to powder. Then the stone grew until it became a great mountain which filled the whole earth.—Dan. 2:31-45

The Prophet Daniel interpreted the dream for the king. Speaking to Nebuchadnezzar he said, "Thou, O king, art a king of kings: for the God of heaven hath given thee a kingdom, power, and strength, and glory. And wheresoever the children of men dwell, the beasts of the field and the fowls of the heaven hath he given into thine hand, and hath made thee ruler over them all. Thou art this head of gold."—vss. 37,38

There, then, at the very time that the Jewish nation lost its independence, and to the Gentile king who subjugated the Israelites, God gave dominion to the first of a long line of Gentile rulers, reaching through successive empires until the times of the Gentiles should end. Daniel explained to the king of Babylon that others would arise, as represented by the silver, brass, and iron of the image which he saw in his dream.

Historically, these were Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome. Then came the divisions of the Roman Empire, as depicted in the toes of the image. Thus the image prophecy reached down to our own day, to the time of the divided Roman Empire represented in the various states of Europe as governed by hereditary ruling houses prior to the First World War.

Concerning the ‘stone’ smiting the image on its feet, Daniel said, “Then was the iron, the clay, the brass, the silver, and the gold, broken to pieces together, ... and the stone that smote the image became a great mountain, and filled the whole earth.” (Dan. 2:35) Babylon, as an empire, fell when conquered by the Medes and Persians. The Medo-Persian Empire crumbled when overthrown by Greece. Likewise, the Grecian Empire fell when conquered by Rome. Finally, the Roman Empire was broken up into the many states of Europe.

But Daniel declares that the gold, silver, brass, and iron, of the image were broken to pieces ‘together,’ or at the same time. This denoted that the image was not so much a picture of Gentile kingdoms or governments, as such, but of something which was common to a certain succession of Gentile powers beginning with Babylon in the days of Nebuchadnezzar, and ending in the days of divided Rome. It seems clearly to be that which was stated to Nebuchadnezzar by Daniel—‘The God of heaven hath given thee a kingdom, ... Thou art this head of gold.’

This indicates that Babylon became the head of gold only when the God of heaven gave permission to rule. Babylon existed before this, but not as the head of gold. This same ‘ordering’ as Paul describes it, carried through to Babylon’s successors. Its true meaning was understood by Jesus and the apostles, but later it became distorted in meaning, and latterly described as ‘the Divine right of kings.’ This Divine right of kings philosophy was the ruling authority in Europe until it was destroyed as a

result of the First World War. Commenting on this, a writer in the *London (England) Sunday Express* said:

“Who, in 1910, would have believed any of the things that have come to pass among the ruling houses of Europe in a few short years? Consider them as they were—the Romanoffs, the Bourbons, the Hapsburgs, the Hohenzollerns. Before the war [the First World War] they seemed entrenched in power and wealth forever. Think of how for centuries they had owned Europe and ruled it—how they had told the world that God had appointed them to rule it. ... And yet a series of little puffs of wind that blew soon after they assembled in strength for almost the last time at Edward VII’s funeral in 1910 sent them flying. None of them, it is safe to say, had the slightest inkling of the disasters and adventures that were to befall them and their relatives.”

There are still governments in Europe, but they are no longer upheld by the Divine right of kings philosophy. That, which was common to all the Gentile governments involved in the symbolic image seen by Nebuchadnezzar in his dream, has perished. The rulers of the last remaining ones, as shown in the toes of the image, are either dead or in exile, with the exception of four or five who serve as figureheads and exercise no authority in world affairs, and very little in their own small countries. Nominally, Britain’s queen is such by heredity, but aside from certain statements made in the coronation service, the claim is no longer made that she rules by Divine right; moreover, the scope of her authority is extremely limited.

It is no coincidence that the same circumstances, and beginning at the same time which brought the downfall of the Divine right of kings, should also lead to the national independence of Israel. Could we have a more definite fulfillment of the sign given by Jesus—Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled? True, all the promises pertaining to the restoration of Israel are not yet wholly fulfilled, and the Gentile nations are still trying to prevent a complete collapse of their social order; but time prophecies point out merely the beginning of the events to which they apply, not their completion, and what marvelous events have already occurred since the end of the 2,520 years of the times of the Gentiles!

And these events are signs that the end of the Gospel Age is at hand, and that the King ‘whose right it is’ to rule Israel, and all nations, is present. The One whose right it is to rule for Jehovah, is fulfilling Ezekiel 20:33,34, a prophecy concerning dispersed Israel. The Lord says, “Surely with a mighty hand, and with a stretched out arm, and with fury poured out, will I rule over you: And I will bring you out from the people, and will gather you out of the countries wherein ye are scattered, with a mighty hand, and with a stretched out arm, and with fury poured out.”

What ‘fury,’ in the way of persecution, has been necessary to uproot this people from the countries in which they lived, and to cause them to long for, and return, to the promised land! And even now there is but a token number of them who have returned, and these are as yet, for the most part, indifferent to the Lord and know not what he is doing for them. Thus far, as verses thirty-five through thirty-seven of this prophecy state, while they have been brought into their own land, they are still in the “wilderness of the people.”

The people of Israel, although no longer a subject nation, are in the same confusion politically and economically as the rest of the world. The fear that fills the hearts of the Gentiles is plaguing them also. But this will not always be so, for the ultimate purpose, the Lord declares, is to bring them “into the bond of the covenant.”—vs. 37

This is the New Covenant which the Lord has promised to make “with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah,” a covenant in which he will write his law “in their hearts,” and in their “inward parts.” (Jer. 31:31-34) In Romans 11:26,27 the Apostle Paul explains that this covenant will be made when the “Deliverer” comes out of “Sion,” and turns “away ungodliness from Jacob.”

‘Sion,’ or Zion, is used in the Scriptures to symbolize the spiritual phase of the Messianic kingdom in which Jesus is the chief Ruler. “I [have] set my king [the One whose right it is] upon my holy hill of Zion,” declares Jehovah. (Ps. 2:6) In Revelation 14:1, a hundred and forty-four thousand are shown with Jesus on Mount Sion. These are his faithful followers of this age. This spiritual ruling company is again mentioned by the Prophet Obadiah when he saw “saviours come up on mount Zion,” and adds, “The kingdom shall be the Lord’s.” (Obadiah 21) Our Lord’s reign awaits the completion of this class.

Then the blessings of life will flow out and all mankind will be brought to rest and peace in the Lord, and to an opportunity of everlasting life. Israel is being assembled and made ready, even though it is in unbelief and amidst great trouble. To use Paul’s language, they are being received, and he says, “What shall the receiving of them be, but life from the dead,” (Rom. 11:15)—for the Hebrew people, and eventually, for all mankind. Let us then rejoice that he has come ‘whose right it is’ to rule, and that “of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end.”—
Isa. 9:7

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Rewards of Faithfulness

Key Verse: “The angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John.”

—Luke 1:13

***Selected Scripture:
Luke 1:5-66***

THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF the promised birth of John the Baptist was a very special event in the lives of his parents, Zacharias and Elisabeth. It was special because they had never been blessed with a child, and they were advanced in years, well beyond the ability to bear a child of their own. This was truly a miraculous gift from God, as well as a reward for their faithfulness to him. It was also another major step forward in the plan of God for the recovery and ultimate reconciliation of the whole human family from the penalty of sin and death.

Zacharias was a priest of Israel, and the Scriptures inform us that he and his wife Elisabeth were righteous and faithful people in the sight of the Lord. One day while Zacharias was attending to his priestly duties, and offering incense, the angel Gabriel suddenly appeared to him in the Temple with startling news. “The angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John.”—Luke 1:11-13

Thus the preparation for the ministry of John the Baptist began. He was to become a preacher and prophet for the children of Israel by proclaiming that the kingdom of God is at hand, and that the children of Israel must believe, repent, and reform themselves before the mighty hand of God.

He would be given the special privilege of baptizing our Lord Jesus, the Son of God, and to proclaim, “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.”—John 1:29

When John grew to manhood it was fulfilled of him as prophesied, “He will be great in the sight of the Lord; and he will drink no wine or liquor, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother’s womb.

And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God. It is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”—Luke 1:15-17, *New American Standard Version*

John’s ministry had a profound effect upon the Israelites. They were aroused and stimulated by his message, and many were baptized with the baptism of repentance. He was truly a voice “crying in the wilderness” (Matt. 3:3), and God blessed his voice and message. John also denied any suggestion by the people that he might be the promised Messiah, but humbly pointed forward to the greater work of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Although many were baptized with water, they were not baptized with the Holy Spirit. Our Lord Jesus’ ministry, to which John pointed, would open up a “new and living way” (Heb. 10:20) for a special faith class that would be called and selected during the present Gospel Age.

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Accepting the Call

Key Verse: “*The angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS.*”
—*Luke 1:30, 31*

Selected Scripture:
Luke 1:26-56

IN THE LAST LESSON AN angel of God appeared to Zacharias, a priest of Israel, and assured him that he and his wife Elisabeth would become parents of a special child who would be named John. He would be given the privilege of preaching the baptism of repentance to the children of Israel, and also to announce our Lord Jesus as the “Lamb of God” who would take away the “sin of the world.”—John 1:29

Six months later the same angel, Gabriel, appeared to Mary and assured her that she would give birth to a very special son. He would be called Jesus, meaning ‘Salvation,’ or ‘Savior.’ This

miraculous conception and birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ was God’s marvelous gift to the poor groaning human family who had inherited the penalty of death because of father Adam’s disobedience to the Divine law. Mary accepted this special call in her life, and said, “How can this be, since I am a virgin? The angel answered and said to her, The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy child shall be called the Son of God.”—Luke 1:34,35, *New American Standard Version*

The angel Gabriel assured Mary in this matter and said, “Nothing will be impossible with God.” (vs. 37, *NASV*) In response to the angel’s message “Mary said, Behold, the bondservant of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word. And the angel departed from her.” (vs. 38, *NASV*) This was an extraordinary event in God’s plan of salvation. Jesus would be the long-promised Messiah to the people of Israel, and his perfect life, in turn, would be given in sacrifice as a “ransom for all.” (I Tim. 2:6) The promise of his birth signaled a major turning point in the outworking of that plan to be testified in due time.

Upon hearing the glad tidings of this wonderful message from the angel of God, Mary arose, and quickly went to share the news with her kinswoman, Elisabeth, who was already six months pregnant with her promised son, John. It came about that “when Elisabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb; and Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. And she cried out with a loud voice and said, Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And how has it happened to me, that the mother of my Lord would come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby leaped in my womb for joy.” (vss. 41-44, *NASV*) We cannot help but note that Elisabeth quickly recognized the superiority of Mary’s child to her own, yet with humility and reverence she submitted to the powerful hand of God in the upcoming birth of the two miraculous sons.

The closing passage of the scripture in this lesson (vss. 46-55) records Mary’s song and prayer of praise and thanksgiving for the marvelous power and outworking of God that had been energized in her. It also echoes Elisabeth’s prophecy in connection with the fruit of Mary’s womb that would bring joy to the world in the birth of Jesus. Jesus would be her Lord, as well as Lord to the whole human family.

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Obedient Living

Key Verse: “Joseph being raised from sleep did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife: And knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called his name JESUS.”

—Matthew 1:24, 25

***Selected Scriptures:
Matthew 1:18-25;
2:13-23***

THE ANGEL OF GOD informed Mary in our last lesson (Luke 1:30,31), that she would bear a son, and that his name would be called Jesus. Although she was a chaste virgin she learned that her pregnancy was the result of the miracle-working power of God. She would receive Divine overruling and blessing in bringing the long-promised Messiah, the anointed Christ, into the world.

We first learn about Joseph, husband of Mary, in Matthew 1:16. He was the son of Jacob, and Heli was his wife’s father (Luke 3:23), therefore his father-in-law. Although he was engaged to marry the virgin girl, she became pregnant before they were united in marriage. He did not understand that

Divine power was being manifested in connection with the immaculate conception and subsequent birth of our Lord Jesus. Not wishing to make her a public spectacle, he proceeded to make plans to divorce her with as little attention and disgrace as possible.

Joseph was a righteous man and obedient to the laws of God, “But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.”—Matt. 1:20,21, *New American Standard Version*

“Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: Behold, The virgin shall be with child, and shall bear a son, and they shall call His name Immanuel, which translated means, God

with us.” (vss. 22,23, *NASV*) This was a prophecy, as recorded in Isaiah 7:14.

“Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took Mary as his wife, but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus.” (vss. 24,25, *NASV*) Having received this information from the angel, Joseph readily obeyed the command to take Mary into his home as his legal wife, and refrain from any contact with her until she had brought forth her unborn child. In compliance with the civil laws of registry at that time, Joseph traveled with Mary to Bethlehem of Judea where she gave birth to the infant Jesus. She then laid him in a manger, in a stable adjoining the inn, because accommodations at the inn were not available. Our Lord Jesus was indeed born in unusual circumstances.

When Jesus began his earthly ministry (Luke 3:23), he came to Nazareth to preach in the synagogue. He opened the scroll to Isaiah’s prophecy where it had been written of him, and he read the passages from Isaiah 61:1,2. (Luke 4:18,19) The townspeople who heard Jesus speak on that day in the synagogue “bare him witness, and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth. And they said, Is not this Joseph’s son?” (Luke 4:22) Joseph was given a great blessing for his obedient faithfulness to God. He had the privilege of nurturing Jesus from infancy and to watching him mature while guided by the Spirit of God.

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A Wondrous Birth

Key Verse: “She brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.”

—Luke 2:7

***Selected Scripture:
Luke 2:1-20***

AT THE TIME OUR LORD Jesus was born, the mighty Roman Empire ruled the land of Palestine. Augustus Caesar was in power, and he had sent forth a decree for a polling, or census, of the whole, inhabited earth for purposes of taxation and other matters of state. It was in response to this royal decree that Joseph and Mary found it necessary to travel to Bethlehem, native city to both, where they were instructed to be enrolled.

According to Bible prophecy, the long-promised Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, the city of David (Mic. 5:2), and it was the peculiar circumstances in connection with the polling tax and census records that brought Joseph and Mary to

Bethlehem. (Dan. 11:20) With many other people arriving in the city at the same time, and for the same purposes, local accommodations quickly became very scarce. Joseph and Mary were forced to lodge at the inn’s stable along with the other unfortunate latecomers. As it was also the time that Mary was to give birth, the infant Jesus was therefore born during their stay at Bethlehem and brought into the world under the most humble circumstances.

“There were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.”—Luke 2:8-14

The angel proclaimed that the Savior of the world had been born. These were indeed tidings of great joy. Through father Adam the whole human family was subject to death because of sin. Jesus had been provided with a perfect human body, by way of immaculate conception from the Heavenly Father, that he by the grace of God might taste death for every man. Jesus would thus pay the sinner’s penalty for the inherited transgressions of our first parents.

“It came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child.”—vss. 15-17

The angel’s message of peace on earth, and good will toward men, was surely a message of joy. Jesus grew to manhood, and obediently laid his life down in sacrifice as the world’s Redeemer. In due time, under the administration of Christ’s glorious Millennial kingdom of righteousness, the expectations of all men will be fulfilled. It will be a time of rejoicing and joy because of the birth that took place in Bethlehem many centuries ago.

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Preparing the Way

Key Verse: *“This is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee.”*

—*Matthew 11:10*

Selected Scripture:
Matthew 3:1-11;
11:7-10

IN THE KEY SCRIPTURAL reference for this lesson Jesus quotes from an Old Testament passage concerning John the Baptist, which says: “I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the Lord of hosts.”—Mal. 3:1

John was the messenger of God chosen to prepare the way for the “Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.” (John 1:29) Jesus, as prophesied, would not only be the Savior of the world, but he also would be the ‘messenger of the covenant.’

The covenant was the one given to Abraham, that provides for a seed of blessing which will bless all the families of the earth. (Gen. 22:15-18) This promise will be fulfilled during the future Millennial kingdom of Christ. The seed of blessing is our Lord Jesus, and includes his faithful followers. Paul explains, “If ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”—Gal. 3:29

Our Lord Jesus, when speaking to the multitude, proclaimed John to be “more than a prophet.” (Matt. 11:9) Further, concerning his forerunner, he said, “Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”—Matt. 11:11

John had been especially prepared as the servant of God, his mission and calling being Divinely directed. He was also six months older than Jesus, reaching the age of maturity, and beginning his work of introducing our Lord to the people of Israel, a half-year before Jesus began his ministry. The Israelites had been in anticipation for the coming

Messiah, and John's message drew a great amount of attention. "Now while the people were in a state of expectation and all were wondering in their hearts about John, as to whether he was the Christ, John answered and said to them all, As for me, I baptize you with water; but One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to untie the thong of His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."—Luke 3:15,16, *New American Standard Version*

John was a powerful figure in his announcement of God's kingdom, and in his preaching of repentance to the children of Israel. "This is he that was spoken of by the prophet Esaias [Isaiah], saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." (Matt. 3:3) Matthew quoted the words of Isaiah, as recorded in Isaiah 40:3.

God had chosen a strong character to be the forerunner of our Lord and Master. His wilderness experiences had toughened him to live separately from the various sects and parties among the children of Israel. Even during our Lord's ministry many received Jesus, who had first accepted the teachings of John the Baptist, and of repentance, and were baptized by John. These, however, were not baptized by the Holy Spirit. That was the greater ministry of the Master. John, however, faithfully carried out God's purpose in him to be the forerunner of the Lord of Glory, the greatest life that has ever been lived.

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James, I and II Peter

THE EPISTLE OF James was written, according to its opening verse, “to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad.” From this we may judge that its message was intended to be especially appropriate for Jewish converts to Christianity, irrespective of the particular tribe of Israel to which they formerly may have been attached. This simple statement also reveals that the Gospel of Christ, even at that early time in the Christian era, had reached representatives of all Israel.

Regardless of the identity of those to whom these epistles may originally have been addressed, the truths which they present are fundamental to the plan of God, and are as appropriate to all Christians today as they were to the small groups to whom they were originally directed. It is still essential to “count it all joy” when we “fall into divers temptations;” it is still true that “the trying of your faith worketh patience;” and it is still important to “let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing.”—ch. 1:2-4

In this opening chapter, James also presents a very revealing lesson on the subject of prayer. “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him. But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. For let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord.”—vss. 5-7

In the twelfth verse James gives every Christian a wonderful promise, saying, “Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him.” The Lord Jesus did make a promise almost identical to this, which reads, “Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.”—Rev. 2:10

It is in this epistle that we read, “Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway

forgetteth what manner of man he was. But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed.”—ch. 1:22-25

In the first nine verses of chapter two James presents a lesson on the evil of showing partiality in the church. He cites as an illustration the case of a rich man and a poor man seeking fellowship in the church, and the possibility that the rich man might be favored above the poor man. This, he points out, would be wrong and unchristian.

Beginning with verse fourteen of this chapter James gives us a lesson on faith, and how it is demonstrated by our works. He tells us that Abraham was not justified by his faith alone, because his faith was demonstrated by his works. James asks, “Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar?”—ch. 2:21

In the opening verses of chapter three, James points out the importance of a Christian’s controlling his tongue as best he can. It is a small but unruly member of the body, he reminds us, and one which no one can fully tame. He says that the tongue is “a world of iniquity,” that it “defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell [Greek, *Gehenna*].”—vs. 6

Gehenna is used in the Scriptures as a symbol of everlasting death, which is the punishment for all willful sinners who continue to reject the grace of God through Christ. James’ lesson is that the tongue, if allowed to speak evil and engender strife among the brethren, might finally be the cause of its owner suffering this penalty of lasting death.

In verse eleven the reason for this is suggested. While admitting in verse eight that no man can fully “tame” the tongue, yet he asks, “Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter?” The thought is that if the tongue continually speaks evil it would indicate a corrupt heart condition. There is always the possibility of erring in word as well as in deed, but if the heart is pure, the general level of our conversation will be high and pure.

The first six verses of chapter five are a prophecy pertaining to the last days, the time of the Presence of the Lord. (vs. 8) James forecast the calamities which were to come upon those who “have heaped treasure

together for the last days.” (vs. 3) We are undoubtedly living in the time of the fulfillment of this prophecy. Never has there been such a heaping together of treasure by individuals and by corporations; and never has there been so much fear on the part of the rich concerning the dangers which threaten their riches.

This is not to be taken as a general condemnation of all who possess more riches than they may need. The main value of the prophecy to the Christian is in the fact that it helps to identify the importance of the time in which we are now living. The practical application James made of the prophecy for the benefit of the brethren in his day is, and we quote: “Be patient therefore, brethren, unto the coming [*parousia*—presence] of the Lord. Behold, the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early and latter rain. Be ye also patient; stablish your hearts: for the coming [*parousia*—presence] of the Lord draweth nigh.”—vss. 7,8

In this epistle, which is so predominantly made up of exhortations to faithfulness in Christian living, the apostle reminds the reader of the real incentive to Christian faithfulness, which is the return of Christ and the establishment of his kingdom. Thus James, even as the other writers of the Bible, keeps before us the great Divine plan, through Christ, for the restoration of mankind through the agencies of Christ’s kingdom. This is the central theme of the entire Bible.

PETER’S FIRST EPISTLE

This letter, according to Peter’s opening words, was sent to the brethren “scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia.” The groups of brethren in this general territory were brought into being largely through the ministry of the Apostle Paul. It is thought by some that one of Peter’s objectives in writing the letter was to confirm that the Gospel was true and that Paul, although the newest of the apostles, could be depended upon as a special teacher sent from God.

While this may have been in Peter’s mind when writing the epistle, the theme of his letter is definitely of a doctrinal nature and no doubt designed to strengthen the brethren in their endurance of Christian suffering by revealing its relationship to the Messianic cause. To appreciate this we need to recall briefly Peter’s own former experiences by which he was especially equipped to discuss this particular subject.

Peter, more than any of the other apostles, rebelled against the course of his Master in voluntarily surrendering himself to his enemies and allowing them to put him to death without a just cause. He said to Jesus, “Be it far from thee, Lord.” (Matt. 16:22) In the Garden of Gethsemane he drew his sword and undertook to prevent Jesus’ arrest, but was told by his Master to desist, that those who take to the sword shall perish by the sword.—Matt. 26:52

To Peter it seemed altogether wrong that Jesus, who had done no wrong, who had spent his life doing good—comforting the people with the kingdom message, healing the sick and raising the dead—should be arrested and put to death. In the upper room Jesus said to Peter, “I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren.”—Luke 22:32

Peter was not then fully ‘converted’ and able to understand just how, as Jesus had stated it, one who lost, or gave up his life, would find it. (Matt. 16:25) However, the Holy Spirit revealed this to him, and now, in his first epistle we find him, in harmony with his Master’s special commission, endeavoring to strengthen the brethren along the very line which had presented such a problem to him; namely, suffering for well-doing.

In the opening chapter of the letter Peter lays down the scriptural foundation for his lesson on this topic. He speaks of a great salvation which the prophets foretold but did not comprehend, “searching what, or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow.”—ch. 1:10,11

Peter reminds us that the prophets had foretold the ‘sufferings of Christ,’ and now he understood that Jesus’ voluntary suffering and death were in keeping with this prophetic testimony, and that his death was necessary to redeem the world from Adamic sin and death. Peter also understood something further in connection with those prophecies pertaining to the sufferings of Christ, for he realized now that they also applied to the followers of Jesus.

Jesus had, on occasions, explained to his disciples that if they would come after him they would have to take up their cross and follow him—into death. (Matt. 16:24) Now Peter understood fully what that invitation

implied, and in this epistle seeks to strengthen the brethren to endure the suffering involved in faithfully following in the Master's footsteps. Note the following excerpts: "Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up . . . sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ."—ch. 2:5

"This is thankworthy, if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully. For what glory is it, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? but if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God. For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously."—vss. 19-23

"If ye suffer for righteousness' sake, happy are ye: and be not afraid of their terror, neither be troubled."—ch. 3:14

"It is better, if the will of God be so, that ye suffer for well doing, than for evil doing. For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened [made alive] by the Spirit."—vss. 17,18

"For as much then as Christ hath suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves likewise with the same mind."—ch. 4:1

"Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy"—vss. 12,13

Thus does Peter make clear the great privilege of suffering with Christ that we might reign with him. It was this that the Holy Spirit had testified through the prophets; that is, the 'sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow.' This glory to follow the suffering is described by Peter as "an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you."—ch. 1:4

Peter realized that it would be impossible for any follower of the Master to endure this foretold suffering in his own strength, so he speaks of their being "kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time." (ch. 1:5) He explains also that this

trial of our faith is “much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire.”—vs. 7

He speaks of the “appearing of Jesus Christ: Whom having not seen, ye love.” (vss. 7,8) One of the inspirational powers in the lives of the early Christians was their steadfast hope in the return of Christ. It would be then that the glory to follow their suffering would be revealed. Then Messiah’s kingdom would be established, and they would be associated with him in that dominion which would be from “sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth.” (Ps. 72:8) It was to strengthen them in this hope that Peter wrote, “The God of all grace, who hath called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered a while, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you. To him be glory and dominion for ever and ever.”—ch. 5:10,11

PETER’S SECOND EPISTLE

Peter’s second letter also has a principal theme, which is the return of Christ and the establishment of his kingdom as the great inspirational hope of the Christian. The establishment of Christ’s kingdom implies the overthrow of humanly constituted authority in the earth, the disintegration of Satan’s world, and Peter wrote, “Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness.”—ch 3:11

In the opening chapter Peter outlines ‘what manner of persons’ we ought to be. First, he reminds us of the “exceeding great and precious promises” whereby we are made partakers of the Divine nature, and then adds, “Beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; And to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; And to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity.”—ch. 1:4-7

In the ninth verse he explains that if we lack these things we are blind, and “cannot see afar off.” In verses ten and eleven he explains what he means by the ‘afar off’ things, saying, “Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall: For so an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.”

In the twelfth verse Peter says, “I will not be negligent to put you always in remembrance of these things, though ye know them, and be established in the present truth.” Thus he reveals the purpose of the letter; namely, to put the brethren in ‘remembrance’ of ‘present truth.’ Evidently Peter was quite old when he penned this letter, and did not expect to live much longer, so he wrote, “I will endeavour that ye may be able after my decease to have these things always in remembrance.” (ch. 1:15) What things?

The next verse indicates, “We have not followed cunningly devised fables, when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of his majesty.”

Here Peter refers to the marvelous experience which he, together with James and John, had with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. He indicates that what he saw there was a foreshadowing of the glory associated with the return of Christ and the establishment of the kingdom, that kingdom into which those who do ‘these things’ shall have an abundant entrance.

It was an exciting experience, proving that the Christian hope in the return of Christ was not a ‘cunningly devised fable[s].’ Even so, Peter explained that we have something more substantial than a vision upon which to base such a glorious hope. He says, “We have the prophetic Word more confirmed, to which you do well, taking heed, (as to a lamp shining in a dark place, till the day dawn, and the Lightbringer may arise,) in your hearts.”—II Pet. 1:19, *Wilson’s Emphatic Diaglott*

The ‘day dawn’ is the glorious Millennial morning of promise. Peter indicates that the Lord’s people throughout the age, by watching the “sure word of prophecy” and its fulfillment, would know in their hearts very early in that morning that the time for the kingdom was at hand, that the “day star” (*King James Version*) would arise.

The second chapter of the letter is concerned mostly with the fact that false prophets would plague the church throughout the age. This is in keeping with other prophecies of both the Old and New Testaments. The prophetic picture for almost the entire age is one of apostasy. The fulfillment of these prophecies resulted in the Dark Ages, and an almost complete loss of the simplicity, spirit, and teachings of the Early Church.

In the third chapter Peter returns to the main theme of the letter, saying, “This second epistle, beloved, I now write unto you; in both which I stir up your pure minds by way of remembrance: That ye may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us the apostles of the Lord and Saviour.”—ch. 3:1,2

Peter then explains that there would come “scoffers” in the “last days,” saying, “Where is the promise [evidence] of his coming [*parousia*—presence]? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation.” (vss. 3,4) In Acts 3:19-21, Peter informs us that all God’s holy prophets had foretold that, following the return of Christ, there would come “times of restitution of all things.” This testimony of the prophets was given to the ‘fathers’ of Israel, but the scoffers say, the fathers to whom these promises were made have died, centuries have passed, and there has been no change.

Peter then replies to these critics. He reminds them of Jesus’ prophecy that conditions on the earth at the time of his return and early presence would be as they were in the days of Noah. Peter reminds the reader that a ‘world’ was destroyed in the Deluge. Continuing his lesson, he points out that at the end of the present Gospel Age there would be the destruction of another world, and that this would result from the Master’s return.

“Nevertheless,” Peter adds, “we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness.” (vs. 13) Peter is saying that the main object of Christ’s return, and his thousand-year presence, is not the destruction of the earth, but the establishment of a new and righteous world, a world in which the promised ‘restitution of all things’ will be realized.

In this chapter various symbols are used such as ‘heavens,’ ‘earth,’ and ‘fire.’ These are Bible symbolisms. Heavens and earth, as used by Peter, symbolize the spiritual and material aspects of a social order here on earth, called in the Bible a ‘world.’ Thus a world came to an end at the time of the Flood. Another world is destroyed at the return of Christ, and his kingdom will be the third world.—vss. 6-13

There is much evidence that the “present evil world” (Gal. 1:4), as Paul described it, is even now coming to an end. This makes Peter’s question, “What manner of persons ought ye to be?” a very vital one. (II Pet. 3:11)

The realization that the kingdom is so near should cause every Christian, more than ever, to give 'all diligence' to make his 'calling and election sure.'

Dawn Bible Students Association

Pathways of Promise

THERE ARE MANY varieties of natural pathways. There are the rough, the rugged, the smooth, the steep, the decline, the precipitous, and all these call forth skill, care, and judgment to negotiate. As Christians, we are more particularly concerned with spiritual pathways. In this connection the Bible is our guidebook. It makes clear the path we must take. The psalmist wrote, “O Lord, ... Hold up my goings in thy paths, that my footsteps slip not,” or, as the Hebrew text gives it, “that my footsteps be not moved.”—Ps. 17:1,5

Christians find that the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth unto all who keep his covenant. Our daily prayer should be, O Lord, “Make me to go in the path of thy commandments; for therein do I delight.” (Ps. 119:35) The Lord giveth wisdom and understanding to those who seek after him if they seek as though they were seeking hidden treasure. He giveth unto such sound wisdom; “He keepeth the paths of judgment, and preserveth the way of his saints,” in order that they may “understand righteousness, and judgment, and equity; yea, every good path.”—Prov. 2:8,9

JACOB'S PATHWAY OF PROMISE

Jacob is an outstanding example of one who valued God's favor and promise of future blessing above any immediate material gain. A very brief study of his history shows that he was a man of great faith and a chosen vessel unto God. Jacob, in receiving the birthright he purchased from his brother Esau, incurred Esau's hatred, which forced him to leave home for a number of years. On his journey he vowed that, “If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on, So that I come again to my father's house in peace; then shall the Lord be my God.”—Gen. 28:20,21

Consider Jacob's condition at this time. He was solitary, lonely, and in exile. He had left his father's house to avoid being murdered by Esau, his brother. He was journeying to Padan-aram at his father Isaac's instigation, to take a wife from the daughters of his Uncle Laban. His

heart was heavy with domestic trouble; the pathway before him was dark and dreary, and furthermore, clothed with uncertainty.

His first night away found him at Bethel. This was good traveling—forty miles the first day. Jacob was weary; the sun had set; and doubtless he would think of the four hundred miles of inhospitable desert, that lay between him and Haran, with uncertainty regarding the reception he would receive, even should he reach his journey's end in safety. So, with the good earth for his bed, and stones for his pillow, he lay down in that place to sleep.

He dreamed, and in his dream Jehovah had united heaven and earth, by a stairway, and God said that the land whereon he was lying he would give to him and to his seed. God also said he would not leave him until he had done all that he had spoken to him. Jacob awoke, and was afraid; he was overcome with reverent awe at the presence of God, and, in thanksgiving, anointed the stones with oil from his very scanty store, thereby marking the spot as holy ground.—Gen. 28:10-19, *New International Version*

There he entered into a covenant with God, seeking a blessing on his journey. His requests at Bethel were moderate. He only asked to have God with him; to be kept in the way; to have bread to eat and raiment to wear, and that he might come again to his father's house in peace.—Gen. 28:20,21

Have we as completely covenanted with God, asking him only for the things needful? Are we treading the unknown paths, trusting him whom we have not seen, but love? Are we prepared to trust our all with God? Jacob trusted God, and God delivered him from his Uncle Laban and family trouble, from the Canaanites, and from his brother Esau.

Jacob returned twenty years later to his native home. He had many mixed blessings, and hard experiences during his absence. Was he disappointed at the end? Listen to the joy and gladness that filled his heart as he returned to his native land:

“O God of my father Abraham, and God of my father Isaac, the Lord which saidst unto me, Return unto thy country, and to thy kindred, and I will deal well with thee: I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies, and of all the truth, which thou hast shewed unto thy servant;

for with my staff I passed over this Jordan; and now I am become two bands.”—Gen. 32:9,10

God gave Jacob the increase! No word of complaint is uttered; he does not dwell on the years of hardship and toil since he last walked by Jordan’s stream. He knows the Bethel covenant has been completely fulfilled—he had been greatly blessed having flocks, herds, menservants, and maidservants. Truth has accomplished what mercy covenanted.

God is ever faithful to his Word; he cannot deny himself! God will always do his part. He has said he will never leave us nor forsake us. (Heb. 13:5) Take God as your guide, counselor, and friend. Not one jot or tittle of his Word applied to us can ever fail.

NOAH’S PATHWAY OF PROMISE

“Neither will I again smite any more every thing living, as I have done. While the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease.” (Gen. 8:21,22) These words appear meaningless to many. They regard the seasons as commonplace. The spring blossoms, the rich glow of summer verdure, the bountiful harvest, the hoary frost, and the cold of winter, inspire neither hope nor fear in men today; they neither evoke gratitude nor bring consolation to their souls.

Pause and think, however, what these words meant to Noah and his family, after experiencing the great Deluge. They might well think that what had happened once might happen again. What assurance was there against a recurrence? God gave Noah assurance in the words we have quoted. God gave back to the earth the blessings he had removed for a time. Ever since that time the seasons have been orderly.

God’s faithfulness is here shown. He is a covenant-keeping God, and every harvest is an assurance of his faithfulness. What proof, too, of God’s power! Man may plant and sow, man may reap and mow, but he cannot clothe the fields with golden corn and green grass. God has retained the power of life and creation; he keeps this in his own grasp—it is sacred and not to be communicated to man.

The seasons prove God’s goodness to man. He showers his rain both on the just and the unjust. Men have despised and rejected God, yet he will not curse the earth with a devastating flood again for man’s sake.

Four thousand years have elapsed, but the moon still knows its season and the sun its going down. Let us be fortified in appreciating the succession of the seasons, the recurring of which is an evidence of God's covenant-keeping and his love and power.

The bow in the cloud brings promise to our pathway. We read: "The bow shall be in the cloud; and I will look upon it, that I may remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is upon the earth." (Gen. 9:16) The Hebrew word for 'bow' generally means 'a battle bow,' but in our quotation it means 'an arch or iris of many colors, as seen in the rainbow.' The rainbow appears to join heaven and earth, and figuratively speaks of God's desire for man's reconciliation to himself.

God did not set the rainbow in the heavens as a reminder to himself. He is not forgetful. It is placed there for our sake, that we might remember his mercy and goodness. Only in condescension to human weakness did the Almighty regard the bow as a reminder to him.

Our horizon will never be darkened if we always behold the bow in the cloud! The bow represents Jesus as our bow of promise, assuring us that he is our peace. The rainbow is a sign of peace. It appears on the cloud as the storm passes away. The symbolic rainbow round about the throne also speaks of peace in heaven.

There are, however, some views of Christ, which can only be obtained beneath a clouded sky. When darkness gathers around us and our soul is hard-pressed, look up, and our reviving faith will see the bow of promise! Then our storms will be hushed, and with the sweet singer of Israel we will say, "Thy mercy, O Lord, is in the heavens; and thy faithfulness reacheth unto the clouds."—Ps. 36:5

Think, too, of that not far-off day when we will no longer need the emblem. We will then experience the full reality of God's faithfulness and love. Here below we have no bow without a cloud. There, above, our sun will never set, because, if faithful, we shall be like him and see him as he is. However dark our prospects, or if by grief we may be bowed, it cannot last forever, if we look beyond the cloud.

A PILGRIM JOURNEY

“He found him in a desert land, and in the waste howling wilderness; he led him about, he instructed him, he kept him as the apple of his eye.” (Deut. 32:10) Thus Moses described God’s great care over Israel of old. How accurate the description! God first found his people Israel in Egypt, groaning and oppressed as slaves writhing under their heartless taskmasters.

God found them! Finding presupposes seeking, and, in seeking, the love of the seeker is manifest toward those being sought. When God’s eye of love had been fixed on the Hebrew children he led them about from the Red Sea to the promised land. He led them by paths of promise, which were sometimes straight, sometimes circuitous, but all the while his loving kindness and providence were with them. He compassed them about and instructed them by various laws, and caused them to hear his voice out of heaven. He kept them as the apple of his eye. He gave them further instruction by mercies, judgments, and warnings.

Can we see in Israel the emblem of ourselves? Where did God find us? In a desert land—for earth, with all its loveliness and beauty is a desert place until the sinner finds grace in God through Christ Jesus. There is much in our beautiful earth to attract the eye, much to gratify the human sense; but, though beautiful, it is a desert land. It is a howling wilderness affording no sustenance, no refuge to our soul. If we are the Lord’s, he leads us to our ‘promised land,’ sometimes by devious ways, yet in the right paths to our eternal rest.

Has God permitted us to encounter some severe affliction? Has God taken away any earthly props upon which we too fondly leaned? If so, God is leading us. Our trials are just so many turnings in our pilgrim journey. No briar, no thorn, has been scattered in our path but that which is common to man and to the family of God. Our Good Shepherd is leading us, and he leads his flock with a skillful hand because he knows the right way. If he should bid us stand, do so; if he leads, follow!

How good for us that God kindly veils our eyes! It is good that we do not know his distant pathway for us. If we knew, how disheartening it might be, how long the way would seem! However, God knows, he loves, he hears, and he cares. If we will but put ourselves fully in his hands, the longer he leads us the more we shall learn to trust him.

His leading is instructive; it speaks of his faithfulness and goodness. He shows us that in our weakness he is our all-sufficiency, that our very frailty will demonstrate his constancy. Our security is that he keeps us as the apple of his eye. He that created the ear, shall he not hear; he that formed the eye, shall he not see?

God found us and is leading and instructing us, and we can safely resign ourselves to him to choose our pathway of life. Rest calmly, therefore, upon his precious promises. Let our prayer be as expressed in the hymn, "Lead kindly light; the night is dark, and I am far from home: lead thou me on. Keep thou my feet; I do not ask to see the distant scene—one step enough for me."

Treat me, Father, as a little child, and guide me where to go. Give me childlike humility and trust. Make me genuine; give me the love and affection which is open and flows freely. "Be thou our guardian and our guide, o'er every thought and step preside."

DAILY STRENGTH

"As thy days, so shall thy strength be." (Deut. 33:25) The Christian is a pilgrim traveling ever forward through a dreary wilderness to his promised Canaan. En route, his experiences are varied and sometimes he meets with reverses. The path is sometimes steep; the road rugged and rough; storms are encountered; therefore he requires great strength, energy, and patience.

Often if he tries to anticipate tomorrow, or the future, his heart sinks within him, courage gives way, despondency and doubt set in. Varying vicissitudes, however, must of necessity come to the Christian in order that the heart may experience both sunshine and shadow. The bright star of today leading us on may be in deep gloom tomorrow. Why? That we might pause and halt a little while and hear his voice, 'As thy days, so shall thy strength be.'

Stops along life's journeys are as necessary as the pauses and stops in music. We must be renewed in grace, that the grace of God in us might overflow to others. We pause that we might recognize the source of life's refreshing springs and his presence in our hearts. These sustain us, and we are reminded that we are the temples of the living God.

We need the cross we bear as much as the air we breathe, or the light by which we see. It draws us to our Father's side in prayer. It binds us close to him. "Wait on the Lord: be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart: wait, I say, on the Lord."—Ps. 27:14

Does it seem hard to wait upon God? Let us consider two examples of waiting—Moses and Jacob. In his own strength, Moses waited until he was forty years old when he thought the time was ripe to deliver Israel, but God kept him another forty years in the wilderness preparing him for his subsequent forty years' leadership of Israel.

Moses' period of waiting proved four things to him: (1) his personal unfitness; (2) his fear of the people's unbelief; (3) his lack of eloquence; (4) his need for humility, which caused him to request that some other leader be sent. God, however, having conditioned him, gave him all the necessary aid for his leadership.

Jacob served God fourteen years for Laban's two daughters, Leah and Rachel. He served Laban another six years for his cattle. Jacob, too, was disciplined by his many trials.

Our times of waiting are times of preparation, mellowing our spirits, cleansing our hearts, preparing us both to receive and give with propriety the things we have received so graciously from our Father's hand. Only when God has mellowed and molded our characters can he work in, and through, us according to his good pleasure. If we have good reason to believe that our daily lives are responding to, and attaining, the end we have in view, our trials will seem light, and all things will indeed work together for good to us who love God, and who are called according to his good purpose.—Rom. 8:28

THE PATHWAY OF PROGRESS

"The path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day." (Prov. 4:18) "The light shall shine upon thy ways." (Job 22:28) These two texts treat Christian life from the viewpoint of progress. There is however, a value in looking back, not going back, not retracing our steps, but looking back to see how we can render more unto the Lord for all his benefits toward us.

Spiritual progress is conditional. Job 17:9 reads: "The righteous also shall hold on his way, and he that hath clean hands shall be stronger and

stronger.” Spiritual growth produces spiritual maturity. How is spiritual maturity reached? In the words of the Scriptures, by putting away childish things, cultivating understanding, and striving after the Christ ideal. Spiritual growth produces spiritual beauty, and spiritual beauty is something akin to spiritual fullness in Christ. Fullness in Christ produces the overflowing cup which is accompanied by blessing, joy, and the fullness of God.

The Christian’s life is comparable to a journey, because progress is to be made in the way. There can be no standing still as the days, the weeks, the months, and the years soon pass. The child of today becomes the youth of tomorrow, the youth becomes the man, and the man soon becomes the veteran.

There is another kind of progress to be made by all Christians. It is the pathway of character formation. Our daily experiences and our reactions to them, the thoughts occupying the mind, our companions, all combine in forming character. We must grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, ever pressing onward to the mark of the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. This can produce weariness. We must not, however, become “weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not.”—Gal. 6:9

There must be no standstill in the Christian life; we either advance or go backward; even when the pulse beats feebly, or the eye is growing dim, there is no single period when we can say, “Here will I rest.” With a firm grip on the cross it must be forward, onward, upward, and heavenward. This must ever be the Christian’s motto.

If ever you feel weary, think what it was that led Christ to the cross! It was the Savior’s love, his full resignation to the Divine will, and his loyalty to an eternal purpose. The Christian must ever be prepared to surmount fresh difficulties on his way homeward, being assuredly convinced that his pathway is leading him in triumph to glory.

What grounds have we to believe in such a pathway? We were once in darkness, and now, by the grace of God, we are in the light because we are in the Lord. Once we were ignorant of God, now we can say, “Abba, Father.” (Rom. 8:15) Now, no longer blinded by Satan, we follow the Light of the world, holding forth the Word of life in the midst of a “crooked and perverse” generation.—Phil. 2:15

This light is progressive. It is like the dawn of day which creeps gradually over the earth. The gray streaks of dawn bite into the horizon revealing at first the outline of the distant hills, and gradually illuminating the earth, completely sweeping away the darkness of night. From the very earliest spiritual dawn which lighted our lives, there is spiritual progress. Faith, hope, and love grow, leading to a mature spiritual understanding, bringing richer comforts and consolations which are the reward of the believer.

THE NEED FOR PRAYER

There cannot be true progress without prayer. How should we approach God? We should come reverently, yet boldly, to the throne of grace, that we might obtain mercy, and find grace to help in every time of need. (Heb. 4:16) The psalmist says, “Lord, thou hast heard the desire of the humble: thou wilt prepare [*margin*, also translated establish] their heart, thou wilt cause thine ear to hear.”—Ps. 10:17

Prayer brings assurance. Prayer brings every grace of the Spirit into active, holy, and healthy exercise. Prayer is the stream that supplies refreshing vigor and nourishment to all the plants of grace. Prayer is a sacred channel—a channel through which the Lord supplies our every need.

For what should we pray? Pray for God’s glory, for the grace in every time of need. Pray for quickening, restraining, and sanctifying grace. Pray to be kept from falling, to be held up in slippery paths. Pray for a lowly mind, a contrite heart, and a close and humble walk with God. Pray that in prosperity we may not forget God, and in adversity that we may not be forgotten. Pray that in our health we may be given grace to use it to his glory, and in sickness for a patient submission to his will. “Taste and see that the Lord is good: blessed is the man that trusteth in him.”—Ps. 34:8

We have a throne of grace. This throne is available in a world of woe. God sits on that throne to dispense to us pardon, peace, comfort, light, direction, and help in every time of need. Do not linger because you feel you are unfit to approach the throne of grace. God desires us to understand that it IS a throne of grace, and not a throne of merit. As the poet has said, “Our daily load would lighter be, if only we’d draw nigh

to thee. Draw nigh in faith and full belief—he'll take the sting away from grief.”

THE PATHWAY OF ASSURANCE

“I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day.” (II Tim. 1:12) These are the words of Paul the aged. He was about seventy when he made this utterance, and in a Roman prison. But he was calm, positive, tranquil, full of joyful anticipation in the closing scenes of his life. Quite different from the morning of one's life, when hope sheds its brightest radiance.

Paul was about to lay his hoary head upon the block in terminating his Christian ministry. He was ready to be offered; the time of his departure was at hand. Yet he had the spirit, the good cheer, with which to encourage young Timothy, his son in the faith.

At this crisis of Paul's life his faith was not as a leaf driven with the tempest, not as a reed shaken with the wind, but as an oak deeply rooted, surviving the blasts of storms, still unmoved. His faith was ready for the last mighty whirlwind which was about to sweep through its branches. His attitude was of calm assurance. The shades of eventide gathered around the apostle, but the fire of heaven lighted the spirit of his heart. He saw the gleam of a brighter sky beyond, and with tenfold greater conviction he saw his goal and his life's object accomplished; therefore he could say with assurance, 'I know whom I have believed.'

The Holy Spirit witnesses that we are the sons of God, and this gives assurance. Obedience, however, is also essential to assurance, and obedience is the test of our love. Assurance comes as a result of right-doing—“the work of righteousness shall be peace; and the effect of righteousness [will be] quietness and assurance for ever.”—Isa. 32:17

Assurance is not a grace given to the believer which may never again be weakened or removed. Christian experience is varied. A Christian's journey is never all sunshine. To increase assurance, look back upon the pages of your experience, and be not afraid. You will see your pathway marked with 'Ebenezers' (stones of help, I Sam. 7:12) testifying to your Savior's faithfulness and to God's mercy. These have sustained us in trial, supported us in perplexity, and been our mainstay when vain has

been the help of man. Therefore, take these things as pledges of future faithfulness!

THE PATH OF FIDELITY

Some Christians are apparently like some fruits, which ripen more quickly than others. There are those who become speedily ripe for glory. Although we have not all borne the great heat and burden of the day, the words of the Revelator are addressed to all alike, “Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.” (Rev. 2:10) Be fruitful all your life, all your days; though your life may be imperiled, be faithful until the hour of your departure.

Fidelity is the pathway of straightforwardness. God said to Israel, “Ye shall not turn aside to the right hand or to the left.” (Deut. 5:32) Straightforwardness brings spiritual prosperity. Jesus, said, “No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.” (Luke 9:62) Paul said, “This one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before.”—Phil. 3:13

Time, however, tries one’s love for God—time with its changes, sorrows, labors, and temptations. It is not so much the fierce onset that tries one as it is the endurance test. Whether in the workshop, or when we return home; when we rest in bed, or are in the bustle of the day; whether in our family circle, or in society; alone in the field, or in secret retirement, we can never elude the enemy.

The conflict goes on. There must be no season of rest, no truce. If we halt, it is at our peril. If we pause, we may be wounded. The conflict continues even unto death, and we must wrestle in God’s strength until the end. Even the oldest cannot relax if he would be a faithful soldier of the cross.

Faith must always abound. We must be in the world, yet not of it, for we have come out of it, not by monastic seclusion, but by overcoming its temptations and living apart from its spirit. We can appreciate innocent delights, yet we must not be ensnared by them. In the power of the Holy Spirit we must ever rise above the material things of this life.

Many things appeal to our sight, yet we must value rather the things unseen—seeing him who is invisible. Sometimes we pray and see no

answer to our prayer. However, we must still watch and pray. Sometimes we shall be harassed with doubts and fears, seemingly walking in darkness and seeing no immediate light, yet by faith we must continually trust God. To endure to the end is no easy task, but it is not in our own strength that we shall continue steadfast. Like the Apostle Paul, we must look for our sufficiency in God.

What an array of triumphs is credited to Paul! He kept the faith at Lystra, Iconium, and at Antioch against erring Peter. Paul kept the faith at Philippi, and made the dungeon echo back his praises to God. Paul kept the faith at Ephesus, pointing men not to Diana, but to Jesus Christ as their only Savior. In Jerusalem, Paul kept the faith when he was bound with fetters.

This same strength, from the very same source, to help us continue faithful, is ours, through faith and obedience. Our conflict is not bereft of encouragement; our armor has been proven—we have a mighty champion. No warrior who has been faithful to the Savior’s banner ever perished eternally, for upon that banner is written, “No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper.” (Isa. 54:17) Listen to our Captain—‘Be thou faithful unto death and I will give thee a crown of life.’

Consider our glorious leader, who was exalted above principalities and powers, and who led captivity captive! (Eph. 4:8) Think of the prophets, apostles, and others who had found God faithful, and then be inspired to action. “Quit you like men, [and] be strong.” (I Cor. 16:13) Be not “weary in well doing ... we shall reap, if we faint not.” (Gal. 6:9) Toil on in patience, doing the Master’s work. Do battle with evil, both from within and without. Daily gain victory over sin. Deny yourself, and be a willing crossbearer. Anticipate that grand sabbatical rest, and come and let the thought of it nerve you for your daily struggle!

Dawn Bible Students Association