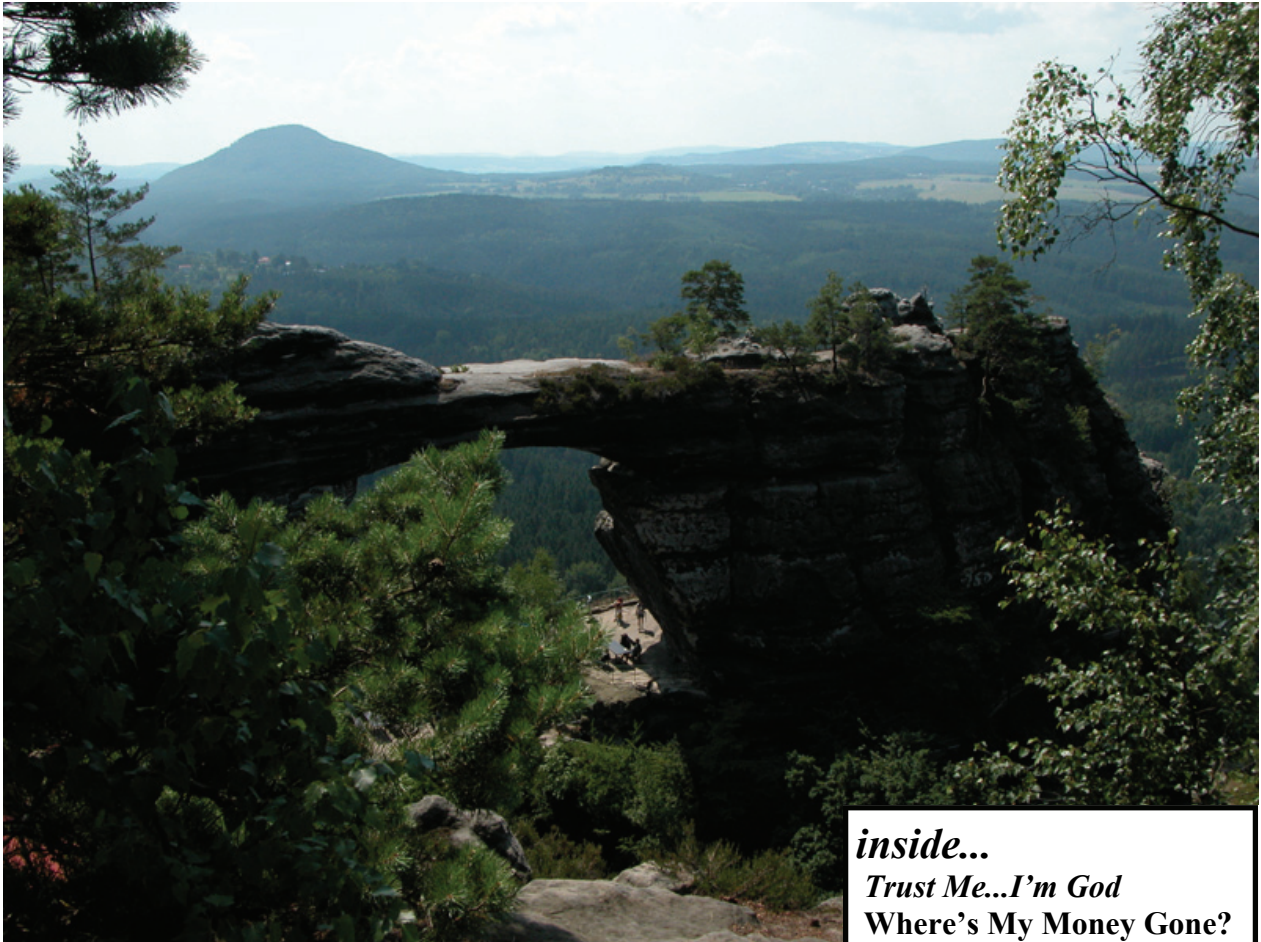


new **Horizons**

Vol 14 No 6

November / December 2010

addressing the important issues for today and tomorrow



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CGOM

Churches Of God Outreach Ministries

With around two thousand Christian denominations vying for your attention, it's easy to miss the important issues of life and religion. It's our hope that through *New Horizons* our readers will come to understand the true meaning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Gospel was proclaimed by Jesus and by His apostles in the clearest of terms - and recorded for us in the Scriptures. Over the centuries that truth has been buried, dug up, buried again. Our desire is to restore the simple apostolic message. We hope you will be excited by what the Scriptures reveal about life, and the horizons beyond

Who We Are

The *Churches of God Outreach Ministries* is an international association of independent local assemblies - Christians who meet together for worship, instruction in the faith and fellowship. Each assembly is self-governing according to Bible principles, but co-operates through our Conference with other like-minded assemblies to work towards agreed evangelistic goals

These goals are within the framework of the commission set for his church by Jesus: "...going, therefore, disciple all nations, baptising them...and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20). He further commanded that we "...Shepherd...[and] feed my sheep".

To these ends we publish Bible-based literature - eg our bi-monthly Newsletter OUTREACH, NEW HORIZONS magazine, the BIBLE BASICS on-line home study course, and the 32-lesson Study Course. The *Outreach Ministries* also supports a network of independent fellowships and scattered brethren

We cordially invite all independent fellowships of whatever size - and individuals - to associate with us in this worldwide ministry. Our *Statement of Beliefs* and a *Publications Catalogue* is available from any of our addresses or from our web site www.cgom.org. We are pleased to offer you, without charge, any of our publications

New Horizons is published by the *Churches of God Outreach Ministries*, an association of independent churches, to make known the good news of the soon-coming Kingdom of God

It is distributed free on request, being a co-operative voluntary effort financed by the members and friends of the *Churches of God*. We also welcome the financial support of all who benefit from our publications and who wish to labour with us.

If you would like a copy of our *Statement of Beliefs* please request it from any of the addresses listed

Churches of God Outreach Ministries
P O Box 54621
Tulsa, OK 74155-0621
USA
e-mail: information@cgom.org
1-800-611-8080
Editor: James McBride
e-mail: coguk@aol.com

The Churches of God, UK
PO Box 2525
LINCOLN LN5 7PF United Kingdom
Regd Charity No 283358
e-mail: coguk@aol.com

The Churches of God Outreach Ministries
PO Box 476 Don Mills Station
Don Mills Ontario M3C 2T4 Canada
www.canadianchurchofgod.com

or from:

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new Horizons

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'Increase our faith' requested the disciples of Jesus. How?

The power and authority exercised by Jesus awed his disciples to ask him to increase the deficit of faith in themselves. Faced with a 'spiritual mountain' - casting out a demon - they had failed miserably. Lack of faith, it is clear, hinders our spiritual activity. Yet 'faith' is an essential element of the Christian's life.

Faith, according to the apostle Peter, is the foundation of our life in Christ (II Peter

1:1-7). It is the spiritual basis for our calling to '*glory and virtue*', an assurance that we will be '*partakers of the divine nature*'. Upon it we, with due diligence, build Christ-like character.

To faith we are to add virtue (strength, courage), knowledge, self-control, patience, godliness, brotherly kindness, love. All character traits of Jesus. Continues Peter:

For if these things be in you, and abound, they make you that you shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But he that lacks these things is blind, and cannot see afar off, and has forgotten that he was purged from his old sins. Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if you do these things, you shall never fall

(vv.8-10)

Godly Example

The people of God through all ages have lived by faith. Many have suffered persecution, torture, mocking, jail, stoning, destitution, have become wandering refugees. All because they lived their faith for the divine promise of life for eternity (*see* Hebrews 11:36-40). We don't have far to delve in history - even the blood-stained his-

tory of Christianity - to uncover 'religious folk' persecuting and killing faithful believers. Indeed Jesus predicted that persecution of his followers would continue into our own time. Are we prepared? Will our faith be sufficient? How can we 'increase our faith'?

Building Faith

With little effort we can have someone top up our oil tank or our glass. Can we top up *faith* - just by asking? Certainly it can't be bought. No amount of charitable giving or charity work will buy it. But if you do recognize your need and ask Jesus for 'more' - *then be prepared for a challenge!* Muscle isn't built by indolence - *nor is faith.*

Jesus answer to the disciples' request was to point out the necessity of 'prayer and fasting' for the task at hand - the expulsion of that particular and powerful demonic presence. They had already been given the authority by Jesus

to expel evil spirits (Matthew 10:1) - this was a lapse of faith and not the sustained faith of maturity.

So, faced with a 'mountain' Jesus prescribes the considerable self-discipline of '*prayer and fasting*'. But there's more. Let's first define faith.

Faith is a quality we use every day. Faith that the bus driver will get us to our desired destination. Faith that the sun will come up. Faith that the lights will go on, that we will survive the day.

Similarly, the word as used in the New Testament (Gk. *pistis*) simply means reliance - reliance on a God who is totally trustworthy. Writes one commentator: 'Such reliance enabled the believer to treat the future as present and the invisible as seen'.

It is, in essence, *trust*. And there's no point in religion unless we have it.

The Unchanging God

The ancient 'gods' couldn't be relied upon. They were fickle, and indeed were mere expressions of human nature, gods created in the image and likeness of man. The Creator God is not so. The God of the Jewish-Christian Bible assures us '*I am the LORD. I change not*'. What God has accomplished for us, done for us, how He cares for us, never changes. Jesus is '*...the same yes-*

Trust Me ... I'm God

terday, today and forever' (Hebrews 13:8).

No matter what era of human history, no matter where we live, no matter what our religious belief or lack of belief - then and now we face uncertainty. Our world is troubled. A relative few are financially stable, but most struggle to some degree. A long life unaffected by disease or injury escapes virtually all of mankind. Stable family life is increasingly but a dream of new love. We can't even trust the ground under our feet.

Jesus recognized these universal needs, and provides the solution: *'Come to Me'*, he said, *'all those laboring and being burdened, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, because I am meek and lowly in heart, and you will find rest to your souls'* (Matthew 11:28-29).

That's a gold star promise. Solomon, too: *'Trust in the LORD with all your heart and don't lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will direct your paths'* (Proverbs 3: 5-6). He knows us intimately, knows what is best for us in every circumstance of life.

Expect Trouble

In no way, though, does the Father imply a stress-free life for those who believingly come to Him. He predicts trials, persecution - even death for some - for maintaining our faith. His concern is for our spiritual welfare: the material is important only as it affects the spiritual. Hence He may not heap on us the riches we

desire. He may answer prayer with a resounding *'No'* or *'Not now'* or *'You are not yet ready for it'* or *'You've got to be joking'*!. He may allow persecution for our beliefs.

Indeed it is by such means that we *'increase our faith'*. Just as an athlete must train, train, train to attain peak performance, so the weight of life's experiences can - if we react to them positively - strengthen our *'spiritual muscle'* and prepare us for service in *'our Father's House'*:

Yet *'...No temptation [adverse experience] has taken you except what is human; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted above what you are able. But with the temptation He will also make the way out, so that you may be able to bear it'* (I Corinthians 10:13).

Whatever befalls the faithful is within the bounds of our ability to cope, as we have access through the Spirit to divine support. There is always, says the apostle, *'a way to bear it'*.

Trust God

Wisdom dictates that we don't make blind purchases - we first put them to the test. We don't immediately trust people we meet - only through prolonged experi-

ence do we learn to trust them. Yet for as long as mankind has walked the earth God has proven Himself perfectly trustworthy. He does what He promises., If we will but believe Him, trust Him.

So *trust God*. He says:

I tell you not to worry about your life. Don't worry about having something to eat, drink, or wear. Isn't life more than food or clothing?

Look at the birds in the sky! They don't plant or harvest. They don't even store grain in barns. Yet your Father in heaven takes care of them. Aren't you worth more than birds?

Can worry make you live longer?

Why worry about clothes? Look how the wild flowers grow. They don't work hard to make their clothes.

But I tell you that Solomon with all his wealth wasn't as well clothed as one of them.

God gives such beauty to everything that grows in the fields, even though it is here today and thrown into a fire tomorrow. He will surely do even more for you! Why do you have such little faith?

Don't worry and ask yourselves, "Will we have anything to eat? Will we have anything to drink? Will we have any clothes to wear?"

Only people who don't know God are always worrying about such things. Your Father in heaven knows that you need all of these.

But more than anything else, put God's work first and do what he wants. Then the other things will be yours as well.

Don't worry about tomorrow. It will take care of itself. You have enough to worry about today

(Matthew 6:26-34 CEV)

Trust God—in the good times, and in times of adversity and uncertainty. It's the best course for all of us! **Ω**

Read the related article:
God's Academy

unsigned articles are by the Editor

Help at Hand...

Our readers are invited to contact us with their comments or with any questions they may have arising from our publications or from their personal study of God's Word

Across the world millions are experiencing the effects of decisions taken way beyond their control. The greed of financiers and the incompetence of Government have driven many onto the financial rocks. Life savings lost, homes re-possessed, careers ruined, families distressed.

But another factor is often overlooked. Each of us could ask the question: *what is my part in my downfall?* For a failure of *personal responsibility* often lies at the foundation of our fallen house of cards.

A Coming Crisis?

Of course, if you start off with next to nothing—as do so many millions—then there’s nowhere to go but up (though many are condemned to unending poverty). For the rest, for those affected by the financial crisis—what of your past actions? The present crisis may not yet have ended, but how can you prepare for a recurrence? Can you learn from your past? Consider some statistics:

- Britain, the world’s sixth richest country, is forecast to owe £1.1 trillion by next year, *ie* over 11% of the value of all we produce
- In 2010 Britain’s debt will grow by almost £168 billion, the interest due for this year being £43 billion
- Total UK *personal* debt at the end of July 2010 stood at £1,456 billion, (and growing at around £150 million each day)
- Average household debt in the UK is £8,628 (excluding mortgages)
- Total secured lending on

Where Has My Money Gone?

dwellings is over £1,200 billion.

- Total consumer credit lending to individuals at the end of February 2010 was £225 billion

Cause and Effect

So, if you are Mr or Mrs Average then you are in debt up to the ears—probably with little hope of climbing out. And if you have a credit card it probably devoured more than you can afford. (The *UK Insolvency Helpline* reports that the average level of debt on its books is £25,000, generally on credit cards.) The question is—*how did you get there?* That’s the effect—but what is the cause?

It may have begun with a crisis—loss of job, serious illness, bereavement. Out came the Visa and the trouble passed; but the debt still nestled on your monthly Statement, and grew, with interest faithfully added by an unfeeling computer. Until you couldn’t cope beyond the minimum payment. Such challenges are understandable.

Age of Excess

On the other hand you may have been tempted to depend on the fickle mortgage interest rate and invested in a house beyond your means. Or perhaps you like to ‘shop till you drop’, or you enjoyed too much the high life—ignoring changing financial cir-

cumstances.

Then there’s the new car, the exotic foreign holiday, the private schooling. (There is, of course, a time to sacrifice.) Maybe you thought the good times wouldn’t pass—so there’s no need to set aside reserves for the proverbial rainy day. Up and up went the debt. Okay in good times; but what if a ‘credit crunch’ should unfold? Jobs curtailed or lost. A clamp-down on lending. Rising prices, and benefits cut.

Most of us have forgotten the virtues of savings and frugality, once a part of daily life. The result? We are only a couple of pay-packets from disaster. Even if cocooned in the millionaire fraternity, it can still be frittered away (*cp* all those losers with huge lottery wins).

Deal with the Past

Sadly, in such circumstances the past is still with us. The creditors circle, the bank forecloses, the bailiffs hover. We need to learn from our mistakes, our profligacy—else we will re-live them next time round.

The ‘doomsday scenario’ is that one day our whole civilisation will tumble to the ground and all the savings you have accumulated will be useless. It’s a view expressed by many economists. The Christian Scriptures, too, predict such a time: ‘...*Not even your silver or gold can save you on that day when I, the LORD, am angry*’ (Zephaniah 1:18).

Here are some simple principles,

Quotations from the Bible in New Horizons are from translations which clearly express the meaning in modern terms

also from the Bible, Build on them and you will be better prepared for any future calamity short of that final collapse engineered by human incompetence.

- **Be aware of world trends:** ‘...When you see trouble coming, don't be stupid and walk right into it-- be smart and hide’ (Proverbs 22:3)
- **Aim to become debt free:** ‘...Owe no man anything, save to love one another’ (Romans 13:8)
- **Don't be greedy for possessions :** ‘...[Jesus] said to them, Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consists not in the abundance of the things which he possesses’ (Luke 12:19f)
- **Curb your desire to acquire:** ‘Do not want anything that belongs to someone else’ (Exodus 20:17)
- **Maintain spiritual values:** ‘...store up your treasures in heaven’ (Matthew 6:20)
- **Develop trust in God to supply your needs:** ‘... seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you’ (Matthew 6:33)

Divine Wrath

Predicted in the Christian Scriptures (and echoed by other faiths) is a time of terrible distress for all mankind. The world has passed through such time and again—but this, said Jesus, will eclipse all of them for its destructive ferocity. It is the ‘wrath’ of the Creator—the just and inevitable consequences

of ignoring the fundamental principles of life.

The divine ‘laws’—His instruction for life—are spiritual but with physical application to the daily grind. And no less so in the realm of financial stability.

No man (despite what is too often claimed) knows when that time will come. It *will* come—but only when the Father has determined the time is ripe to launch His res-

cue plan for human ignorance and destructiveness.

Other ‘great recessions’ may follow our present debacle. Or the next—or this present recession’ may be that final blow to man’s greed when all the resources you have accumulated will be valueless.

All that will remain is the trusting relationship you may have developed with the Creator. **Ω**

When Was Jesus Born?

In most Christian communities our title question is a no-brainer. *Obviously, December 25; no question.* The date is firmly implanted in not only the Christian but also the world-wide culture, being celebrated by adherents of many faiths. Almost, indeed, a universal celebration.

However, as one sceptical columnist recently noted: ‘Historians believe through Gospel references to [King] Herod—about whom we know quite a lot—that Christ was probably born in 4BC by the normal calendar. Christmas Day was merely the continuation of the pagan feast for the depth of winter. It seems to be reverting to that anyway’. His closing comments are well supported!

Bible Festivals

The Christian Scriptures nowhere present us with a clear specific date for the birth of Jesus. Nor is there any indication in them that such a festival was celebrated by the church Jesus founded. Nearly four centuries passed before Christmas officially entered the Christian calendar.

What is crystal clear is that Jesus, the apostles and the church in general observed a different set of divinely-

appointed festivals. They were originally given by the LORD to the people of Israel, though they had their roots from man’s beginning.

Birth Date

In the festivals there’s a clue to the time of Jesus’ birth. The apostle John writes: ‘...the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us’ (ch 1:14). ‘Dwelt’ (Gk *skenoo*) can reference the Tabernacle (Gk *skenos*—Hebrews 8:2) in which the LORD dwelled temporarily in the wilderness. In Hebrew it is *sukkah*, the root for the Feast of Tabernacles (Heb. *sukkot*), the first day of which is 15th Tishri on their calendar—our September/October.

That Jesus was born on the first day of this Festival fits the historical facts, and sits well with the symbolism of the festival.

He was, too, born in a *sukkah*, Hebrew for ‘stable’ (Genesis 33:17)—and also for the temporary dwelling erected during the Festival of Tabernacles (Leviticus 23:42). And, said John, he temporarily dwelled, tabernacled, with mankind for his thirty-three year earthly life. **cont’d p.8**

Jesus portrays his Kingdom as a struggle, with ‘strings attached’. What need you do to enter?

For most ‘born again’ believers, entrance to the Kingdom of God is a ‘done deal’. They have accepted Jesus as their Saviour and salvation is assured. For millions of others salvation is on a perpetual knife-edge. Have I done enough? Am I good enough? Was that sin ‘mortal’? Who, then, is right? Has Jesus done it all—or must I do something?

Back to Jesus’ word on this:

‘...Go in through the narrow gate. The gate to destruction is wide, and the road that leads there is easy to follow. A lot of people go through that gate. But the gate to life is very narrow. The road that leads there is so hard to follow that only a few people find it’ (Matthew 7:13-14)

Doesn’t sound too easy. What, then, must I do to be saved? How do I qualify? Are you one of ‘the few’?

God’s Sons—now

What is clear is that if you have made the right choices, taken the right decisions then you are, *right now*, a child of the Father—a son of God. Writes the apostle Paul: ‘...[I] will be a Father to you, and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty’ (II Corinthians 6:18). And in one of his letters John writes: ‘... Beloved, now are we the sons of God’ (I John 3:2). For such the Kingdom is here and now. Qualified.

But that by no means implies that all is cut and dried. The question is—*how* did you qualify?

Jesus Sufficient

Separated as we are from God by our sin, none of us can earn forgiveness. We can do nothing to reconcile us to the Father—not our ‘good deeds’, not our alms-giving, not our obedience to the Laws of God.

There’s a clue in the annual *Day of*

Atonement—one of the festivals given to mankind by the

Creator to portray His plan of salvation. Those who were part of Israel were cleansed from sin—*by doing absolutely nothing*.

That’s right. The High Priest *alone* in his role as representative of the LORD did everything necessary to atone for the sins of the people. He performed in type what Jesus Christ has now done in reality for all mankind through his sacrificial death and resurrection. But that’s not all.

Covenant Relationship

God chose the sons of the patriarch Jacob and forged them into one nation. They covenanted to be His people:

‘...if you will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then you shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: And you shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation.....And all the people answered together, and said, All that the LORD has spoken we will do’ (Exodus 19: 5-8).

The physical nation of Israel broke that covenant, that agreement, and God, having patiently waited for change, accordingly withdrew His benefits. He has—as Paul tells the Roman (Gentile) Christians—excised them from the pure ‘olive tree’ that is the true faith (*ch 11*)

That faith is the true spiritual Israel—the unchanging relationship between God and believing mankind that has

Are You Qualified?

existed from the beginning. All true believers—Jew or Gentile—are ‘grafted’ into that ‘tree’, into true spiritual Israel (v. 17).

Faith and Action

The essence of that true religion is *faith* (v.20), for ‘...*he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God’ (Romans 2:29).*

Believers, however, are also committed to its structure—to the laws and observances that lie at its core, and by which by our observance we demonstrate our faith (James 2: 14-26).

Hence we note that believers in New Testament times were urged to reflect the moral Law (the Commandments) in their daily lives—following our example, Jesus. They strive to become ‘...*the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness’ (Ephesians 4: 24).*

But as part of the ‘package’ the first Christians also willingly observed the weekly seventh-day Sabbath and the revealed holy days outlined in Leviticus 23. Such practices are part of the life-style of all grafted-in spiritual Israelites, the ‘...*Israel of God’ (Galatians 6:16).*

Convicted of the gulf that separated them from God—that is, their transgression of the divine law (sin: 1 John 3:4)—both Jew and Gentile cried out for forgiveness, were baptized and received the holy Spirit, the essence of any claim to be a Christian (Acts 2:38, (Romans 8: 9).

It is the Scriptural pattern by which all should live who desire that covenantal relationship through Jesus with the Father, how we qualify to become part of His divine Family, the true Israel. Ω

STUDY THE WORD
Be sure to enroll for our free 32-lesson Study Course. It's a key to what is for many a 'Book of Mystery'

The Life of a Christian

Could you spot a Christian in a crowd?

Possibly you could pick out someone with a Bible in hand. But unless he or she is a street preacher or carrying a bill-board, or entering a church Christians blend in with any average crowd. You can't readily identify from externals. That same Bible, however, gives us some clues.

You would indeed expect Christians to attend church. You would expect them to lead a moral lifestyle: not criminal, not a tax-dodger, not violent or an abuser. It's a shock when we read of Christians in violent protests. (We have come to expect that from other faiths.) We are appalled when terrorists are absolved from their sin only to kill again. Or to hear of 'men of the cloth' abusing children. It's 'just not Jesus'.

The apostle Paul is clear about the behaviour expected of all Christians. Writing to the church in Corinth he tells them: '*... Don't you know that evil people won't have a share in the blessings of God's kingdom? Don't fool yourselves! No one who is immoral or worships idols or is unfaithful in marriage or is a pervert or behaves like a homosexual will share in God's kingdom. Neither will any thief or greedy person or drunkard or anyone who curses and cheats others*' (I Corinthians 6:9-10). Quite a comprehensive list of exclusions!

The Material, Too

So—church attendance and the 'inner moral lifestyle', yes. But

there's more. Hear the apostle again: '*...You surely know that your body is a temple where the Holy Spirit lives. The Spirit is in you and is a gift from God. You are no longer your own. God paid a great price for you. So use your body to honor God*' (I Corinthians 6:19-20).

That means we respect not only our spiritual well-being but also our physical. We pay attention to our health—what and how much we eat (God has detailed this for us—eg Leviticus 11), what substances we inflict on our body (anything clearly harmful), care for our immediate environment both internally and externally (how we care for our appearance, our dwelling, our family).

Motivation

To the Corinthian brethren the apostle continues: '*...Some of you used to be like that. But now the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and the power of God's Spirit have washed you and made you holy and acceptable to God*' (v.11).

There has, then, been an inner change. A committed Christian sets aside the practices summed up by those often maligned 'Ten Commandments' [*ie* instructions] and supported by the apostle.

The last of the Ten is curious. The other nine—even including the first four (which identify the God we worship)—are visible in their application, while '*...Don't covet*'

is of the mind. It concerns our motivation. Paul (Colossians 3:5) brands it *idolatry*. To live is to covet!

God's instructions when followed put us in harmony with our being—they are a photo-fit for our created make-up. But due to our rejection of the Creator, our spiritual blindness, we simply are unable to even see their relevance. As the apostle wrote '*...Our desires fight against God, because they do not and cannot obey God's laws*' (Romans 8:7).

Cannot, notice. Of ourselves we do not have the power to consistently follow those foundation principles of living. Something more is needed—divine help, the Spirit of God indwelling and transforming and motivating the mind. Indeed, without that Spirit we cannot claim to be truly Christian: '*...People who don't have the Spirit of Christ in them don't belong to him*' (v.9).

Grow to Maturity

Those who have recently committed to a relationship with the Creator are described—in one sense—as 'new-born babes'. Now begotten by the indwelling holy Spirit they are truly 'children of God' and predestined to grow to spiritual maturity—to become Christ-like—through life's experiences and willing submission to the divine will.

The Scriptures are a mirror to reflect our failings. They are also a manual outlining the Christian way of life. Not only should our 'inner man' flourish but our walk in our community should visibly reflect his perfect way of life. **Ω**

The article
Reap a Destiny
—available free—amplifies
aspects of this topic

Any serious student of the Christian Scriptures comes face-to-face with 'prophecy'. The Bible itself admits that if they fail it can be considered fraudulent. Many prophecies - for example, those concerning the life and mission of Jesus - had accurate fulfilment. Others await fulfilment and are referenced to 'the end-time'. Puzzling to many are those end-time prophecies which relate to 'Israel'. Have they failed?

Two Nations

Unless the Bible has been carefully studied the term 'Israel' is generally misunderstood to refer only to the people known today as Jews. That is, at best, a partial answer - for in the tenth century BC what was then Israel became two political groups of clans or tribes - *two separate nations*.

Jacob—who was later named Israel (Genesis 32:28)—descended from Abraham through his son Isaac. He had twelve sons each of whom developed into a 'clan'. During a famine they migrated to Egypt where they were later enslaved.

Delivered by JHVH from slavery the twelve clans (now enlarged) were united under the leadership of Moses as the nation of Israel (Exodus 19). They continued under direct divine rule for four hundred years. Discontented Israelites then demanded a king, resulting in a line of monarchs who reigned for about three centuries (I Samuel 8:5).

Following the death of King Solomon (died c. 931BC) the nation of Israel was split into two kingdoms - known thereafter as

the *House of Judah* (three clans or

tribes - ruled by the royal line of David) and the *House of Israel* (ten clans - ruled by several dynasties in the north of Palestine known as Samaria). [One clan - Joseph - was divided into two: *Ephraim* and *Manasseh*].

They remained as two distinct nations. In 721BC the latter House of Israel was invaded by Assyria and ceased as a nation, the inhabitants being deported eastwards (II Kings 17:6).

The House of Judah continued until 586BC when they, too, were exiled - to Babylon, where they remained for seventy years. Judah returned to their land, but the vast majority of the House of Israel never did.

A Model Nation

It may seem odd that a tiny nation initially of some two million souls should merit such historical and Biblical prominence. Israel, however, is the centre-piece of the Scriptures, chosen (by God) to model His plan for humanity: '*...He found [Israel] in a desert land, He compassed him about, he cared for him, He kept him as the apple of his eye*' (Deuteronomy 32:10).

It has, sadly, failed and has suffered the consequences of their neglect of the divine principles. The pattern in the ancient world of Israel's rejection of JHVH (eg Hosea 4-5) is repeated in our day - though in a different form.

Israel In Prophecy

'Israel' - in the form of the modern Israelis, the Jews - remains prominent on the world stage, devouring endless news hours and ever the focus of world attention. But it doesn't fulfil the role assigned in the Bible to 'Israel' in the end-time.

A Nation Divided

Believe the prophecies and we must look elsewhere for 'Israel'. A clue is in the promise to Abraham: '*...God said to him, I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall be of you, and kings shall come out of your loins*' (Genesis 35:11). Paul alerts us to the fact that the 'twelve tribes' were extant in his day: '*...now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made of God unto our fathers: Unto which promise our twelve tribes, instantly serving God day and night, hope to come*' (Acts 26:6-7). James confirms this, writing: '*...to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad [Gk diaspora]*' (ch 1:1), as does the apostle Peter (I Peter 1:1)

Much prophecy focuses on 'Ephraim'. One of Joseph's two sons, Ephraim dominated the northern House of Israel and the term 'Ephraim' is used in Scripture as representative of the Ten, though each clan fiercely retained its identity: '*...son of man, take thee one stick, and write upon it, For Judah, and for the children of Israel his companions: then take another stick, and write upon it, For Joseph, the stick of Ephraim,*

and for all the house of Israel his companions' (Ezekiel 37:16).

The continuous narrative Isaiah 9 to 11 is a *pattern* for the end time, flowing smoothly from Ephraim-Israel's downfall through to the appearance of Jesus and His eventual Lordship over the planet.

Each clan or tribe grew to become a national entity. Whatever may be the historical trail, the twelve nations of Israel will exist on the world stage at the return of Messiah.

United Israel

JHVH foretells that both the Jews (the House of Judah) and (ten nation) 'Israel' will one day become - again - one nation inhabiting Palestine (Jeremiah 31:31-34), and participants in '*an everlasting covenant*' with JHVH:

Thus says the Lord GOD; Behold, I will take the children of Israel from among the heathen, whither they be gone, and will gather them on every side, and bring them into their own land:

And I will make them one nation in the land upon the mountains of Israel; and one king shall be king to them all: and they shall be no more two nations, neither shall they be divided into two kingdoms any more at all:

Neither shall they defile themselves any more with their idols, nor with their detestable things, nor with any of their transgressions: but I will save them out of all their dwelling places, wherein they have sinned, and will cleanse them: so shall they be my people, and I will be their God.

And David my servant shall be king over them; and they all shall have one shepherd: they shall also walk in my judgments, and observe my statutes, and do them.

And they shall dwell in the land that I have given unto Jacob my servant, wherein your fathers have

dwelt; and they shall dwell therein, even they, and their children, and their children's children for ever: and my servant David shall be their prince for ever.

Moreover I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them: and I will place them, and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in the midst of them for evermore.

My tabernacle also shall be with them: yes, I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

And the heathen shall know that I the LORD do sanctify Israel, when my sanctuary shall be in the midst of them for evermore.

(Ezekiel 37: 21-28)

That remains future. The nations that comprise the House of Israel—descendants of the northern ten tribes—remain scattered. No matter how scattered, the LORD will restore them to His land (Zechariah 10:6-12). Certainly King David has not been resurrected to reign over the Jews (Jeremiah 30:9). Nor is God's sanctuary yet in Jerusalem.

Sure Prophecies

For those - a decreasing few! - who believe that the Scriptures convey God's word for mankind the prophecies assure us that whatever befalls the nations which comprise Israel and Judah - they remain '*...the apple of [God's] eye*', separated as God's inheritance (1 Kings 8:53), a special people (Deuteronomy 7:6).

Israel will be restored as one nation, and will at long last fulfil its role as God's model nation - an example to all the world. From its capital, Jerusalem, Messiah will establish His rule over all nations (Isaiah 2:1-5) Ω

[Request the article:

The Two Houses of Israel]

Birth of Jesus ...cont'd

It is argued that it simply doesn't matter, for what is important is that he was born, sent by the Father on a mission to save mankind (though that mission is grossly misunderstood by most, even by those professing to follow Christ).

But it is a serious error to confuse the birth of the Saviour with the primitive pagan concept of the supposed birth of the sun [god] in mid-winter. Its symbolism has been transferred to neo-Christianity, with its Sunday worship and church buildings adorned with sun-bursts and oriented towards the sun-rise. Such worship is utterly condemned by God: '*...Obey all the laws and teachings I am giving you. Don't add any, and don't take any away*' (Deuteronomy 12: 32).

Having discarded the only festivals revealed by and acceptable to God for His people, modern Christianity and indeed other faiths have lost sight of the divine Plan, and of the time of Jesus' birth. Ω

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MiniStudy***Joined-up Religion***

'They feared the LORD, and served their own gods, after the manner of the nations whom they carried away from thence' (II Kings 17:33)

Without doubt mankind is confused about religion. There are 'major' faiths and there are myriad others, with new ones appearing almost daily. And all attempt to explain the awesome mystery of 'god'. It's quite strange, for surely if 'God' exists He will make plain His will—who He is, what is His purpose for His creation, how He should be worshipped. Real truth is objective, and the Christian Scriptures seek to address these matters and claim to explain the true 'mystery of godliness'.

- In contrast to other 'holy writings' the Scriptures provide a clear and logical description of origins. God, '*...in the beginning,*' created everything by divine fiat—no need for giant elephants or battles between competing gods (Genesis *ch* 1). Having created mankind the Creator proceeds to reveal His purpose for us and how it will be attained
- What is clear is that He is consistent and unchanging as He over time reveals Himself and His relationship with humanity. The fundamentals of that relationship—'true religion'—will remain till His purpose is fulfilled
- There have been torch-bearers for that true faith since man's beginning: Enoch, Noah, Shem, Abraham, Moses, the prophets of Israel—and ultimately Jesus, God's Messiah, and the Apostles. Together with a multitude of faithful believers (see Hebrews 11) they have maintained the flame of truth—teachings handed down through the centuries—often to the point of martyrdom at the hands of God's enemies
- As the majority of mankind lost touch with the LORD their Creator they turned to man-made and demon-inspired beliefs that appealed to man's base nature. Having lost sight of God, thoughts were turned to the worship of nature—notably to the stars and planets (*eg* the Zodiac). Writes the apostle Paul to the Roman church: '*... Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened' (ch* 1:21). Hence evolved the mishmash of distorted modern day faiths—not excluding much of Christianity
- When Jesus warned of religious deception (Matthew 24:5) he could draw on a rich vein of examples spanning previous centuries. By the time Israel became a nation, nature worship had become widespread and the LORD warned them not to get involved: '*...when you see the sun or moon or stars, don't be tempted to bow down and worship them' (Deuteronomy 4:19)*. It was not to be: '*... These [pagan priests] were the men that the kings of Judah had appointed to offer sacrifices to Baal and to the sun, moon, and stars'.* State-sponsored idolatry!
- Such worship was abominable in God's book. Worse was the rejection of God's command not to take His Name in vain (Exodus 20:7);, that is, not to ascribe to God any practice He hasn't authorised.. God had clearly warned Israel to cling to the true faith: '*...Take heed to yourself that you be not snared by following them,....and that you enquire not after their gods, saying, "How did these nations serve their gods? even so will I do likewise"' (Deuteronomy 12:30)*. Worldwide, and in Christianity, the warning has been ignored. Yet barely freed from Egyptian bondage, Israel reverted to the pagan practices observed in Egypt, and cast the infamous 'golden calf': '*...[Aaron] made an idol in the shape of a young bull. All the people said to one another, "This is the god who brought us out of Egypt!" When Aaron saw what was happening, he built an altar in front of the idol and said, "Tomorrow we will celebrate in honor of the LORD' (Exodus 32:4-5)*. They ascribed their deliverance to a cow! They pretended to worship the LORD—the one God—but with forbidden idolatrous practices. Over the centuries Israel reverted to such false religion (*eg* Zephaniah 1:4-5), eventually being taken into slavery
- Other peoples were drafted into the Land in their place—and the pattern was repeated: '*...They feared the LORD, and served their own gods' (II Kings 17:33)*. Christianity is based on these same texts, yet has repeated the pattern. The practices of ancient heathendom have been boldly grafted into the true faith of Jesus. It is under the same condemnation as ancient Israel (Mark 7:7) Ω

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