

new **Horizons**

Vol 26 No 2

March/April 2022

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 terms clear to those who have 'ears to hear' - 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.

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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 a 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.

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new Horizons

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The human mind, for all its vaunted superiority, is limited. We can construct complex instruments to help us see back into time, but we can't go there and can but speculate as to what we would find. Was there a 'beginning'? How did it start? What lies beyond the edge of the universe (if there is an 'edge?') What is the 'dark matter' that permeates all space? If the *James Webb Space Telescope* could reach to the beginning what would it find?

The material universe is tangible, there for us to probe, to analyse—and to wonder at. But it's origin is a mystery. We guess at (*ie* a matter of belief) a 'big bang' or a 'steady state' but can't explain the source of the atoms or the governing laws.

Indeed the only option—a super-intelligent and all-powerful Creator—is just as obscure. Notice Hebrews: *'...without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that comes to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him'* (ch 11:6).

A Material Beginning

But the evidence surrounds us. God permeates His creation—perhaps that elusive 'dark matter'. (What, really, is 'spirit?') Let's agree that there is, now, a material universe. It is the infrastructure on which God works out His plan.

Some six millennia ago our planet had been prepared for God's grand design—a being with whom He could form an intimate relationship. A being who could share with Him an eternity of spiritual development. Out of earth's elements, the Creator formed man, and animated his body with the breath of life, and who had the potential to live endlessly. We are purposed, no less, than to become spirit members of the Family of God.

Family Foundations

We were allotted a six-thousand year dominion of Earth and instructed in how to administer it in accord with divine principles, with the in-built great '*Law of love*'. (*cf*

A Panorama of God's Plan

Matthew 22:36-40). At his side God gave Adam the perfect partner with whom they would propagate our species.

The pair, created '*...in the image of God*', would unite as '*...one flesh*', as a family unit: '*... man [shall] leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh*' (Genesis 2:24), purposed to nourish and to educate '*...a godly seed*' (Malachi 2:15).

Free Choice

To realize his full potential man needed to maintain his relationship with the Creator by willing

adherence to the law of life. Confronted by an alternative life-style Adam, knowing that God had said '*No—that way is deadly*', willingly chose the contrary path of self-determination (I Timothy 2:14) with inevitable negative consequences for him and all his progeny, the human race.

God, in every age, has patiently invited us through His servants to choose *His* way, and the Christian Scriptures are an inspired record of our failure to hear Him. But few have given heed, and we will all be held accountable for our choice: '*...as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment*' (Hebrews 9:27).

Since we cut our relationship with our heavenly Father, man has exploited earth and its resources to fuel his selfish desires. We have manufactured gods and invented myriad ways to 'serve' them. Humanly-devised moral codes have since degraded the race. We have turned our back on the one true source of temporal peace and prosperity—and have lost sight of that divine plan, the purpose of our existence.

God's Choice

Ever since Adam 'crashed' the inspired inborn operating system God has selected individual men and women to carry forward the knowledge of His plan. Enoch '*...walked with God*' (Genesis 5:24). Noah, uniquely in his time, was a '*...preacher of righteousness*' and '*...found grace in the eyes of the Lord*' (ch 6:8). Abraham '*...kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my*

laws' (ch 26:5).

And a panoply of prophets and inspired historians through the ages—and in face of devil-inspired opposition—maintained the torch of truth and a knowledge of God's grand design.

A New Beginning

The birth of Jesus heralded a new phase of God's plan: '*...These are the words which I spoke unto you, while I was yet with you*', he said., '*that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me*' (Luke 24:44).

Notes the apostle Paul: '*...when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law*' (Galatians 4:4). In him alone—and as the only-begotten son of God—could mankind recover from Adam's sin and its devastating effect, and become fit for the Family of God.

Saviour of the World

Before the creation of Adam the Godhead had planned to *expand* their family: '*...he has chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love*' (Ephesians 1:4). God chose individuals to share His inheritance and to nourish in them His perfect character.

God promised to remedy Adam's breach of the universal law: '*...I will put enmity between you [the Serpent] and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and you shall bruise his head*' (Genesis 3:15). The entire Scriptures are a consistent record of Satan's attempts throughout six millennia to undermine this promise—a promise fulfilled in Jesus.

Born having divine origin he, uniquely among mankind, lived without sin thus qualifying to replace Satan's rule and to be our Saviour. Through him all mankind was invited to become family members with God, His children: '*...if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together*' (Romans 8:17).

The Church of God

For the last two millennia the Father has been selecting 'family members' to serve with Him throughout eternity. They will join all those faithful men and women who, since Adam, '*...having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise*' (Hebrews 11:39).

They willingly chose to follow God's way, whatever the challenges: '*...These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth*' (v.13).

This is the 'good news', the 'Gospel', which has been heralded to the nations since the first Christian Pentecost' (Acts ch 2). All who from a changed heart commit to Jesus and his way and message become the 'church of God'. the 'Israel of God'. They are 'elect', chosen (eg Colossians 3:12).

As predicted by Jesus, that message has been distorted down the centuries and millions of believers, while professing Christ have—perhaps, largely, unknowingly—embraced deadly false teaching. Jesus warned, '*...in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men. For laying aside the com-*

Condemned

Jesus issued a severe warning to those who profess to be leaders and teachers in his church:

'...Not every one that says to me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that does the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied [preached] in your name? and in your name have cast out devils? and in your name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, you that work iniquity.'

Many teachers of the Scriptures serve deadly 'serpents' to their flock (Matthew 7:7-10).

...James in his letter wrote: '*... My brethren, be not many masters [teachers], knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation*' (ch 3:1).

...only those in whom is the holy Spirit will join God's family (Romans 8:14).

mandment of God, you hold the tradition of men' (Mark 7:7-8). The visible church of God, then, is a mix of true and of professing believers, known as such to God. They are scattered worldwide and embedded in countless denominations' and independent groups.

The In-gathering

After his resurrection, as Jesus was returning to the Father, angels conveyed the message, '*...this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as you have seen him go into heaven*' (Acts 1:11).

The returning Messiah won't be alone, for all those in whom is God's Spirit will be restored to life—spirit life in God's family: '*...we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead*

shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed' I Corinthians 15:51-52). Records the apostle John: '...Blessed and holy is he that has part in the first resurrection: on such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years' (Revelation 20:5).

Global Government

Thus begins a one thousand year reign with the nations living under the benign leadership of mankind's Saviour: '...he shall judge among many people, and rebuke strong nations afar off; and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more' (Micah 4:3). A time of peace and prosperity for all.

It is, above all, a time when everyone will be exposed to the free influence of God's Spirit, and the malign influence of the 'god of this world [Satan]' (II Corinthians 4:4) will be removed. All governments will subscribe to the divine Law and there will be one faith the 'law of love'. Over a limited lifespan they may qualify to enter God's spirit Kingdom—a further step in the divine plan.

The resurrected saints, directed by Christ, are assigned roles in this universal government in accord with the degree they overcame during *this* lifetime (cf John 14:2). The various nations over which they reign are the human survivors of the coming catastrophic end-time destruction [see side panel].

The erstwhile ruler of this world, Satan, will be dethroned as Jesus assumes his rightful authority: '...now is the judgment of this world: now shall

the prince [Gk. archon: ruler] of this world be cast out' (John 12:31). John also relays Christ's judgment: '...he laid hold on the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan, and bound him a thousand years, And cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal upon him, that he should deceive the nations no more, till the thousand years should be fulfilled: and after that he must be loosed a little season' (Revelation 20:2-3).

Having ousted Adam, by his sin, as authorised world ruler, the Devil has since been '...the god of this world' (II Corinthians 4:4) and has throughout history

The Survivors

The apostle John (*Revelation*) portrays for us events just prior to the return of Messiah. The world will, for a short time, have experienced the cruel despotic rule of a global religio-political dictatorship.

As with past dictatorships (eg Babylon, Rome, the mediaeval 'Holy' Roman Empire) under pain of death every citizen will be required to 'bow' before the human head—but, in fact, Satan.

As in the Middle Ages many will resist and hide away, while multitudes will be enslaved in labour camps. Such escape death and upon Christ's return will be rescued and returned to their former national territory. The return of the Israel nations is an example: '...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' (Ezekiel 37:21-22).

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

sought to destroy man's redeemer, Jesus and is the actual god of every non-Biblical faith.

The 'Rest of Mankind'

As the millennium ends, God will have gathered into His Kingdom the faithful of all generations and the repentant of the end-time generation.

Jesus, however, said: '...the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done [practised] evil, unto the resurrection of damnation [judgment]' (John 5:28-29). It is now time for Christ to address those from all generations who have not yet entered a relationship with the Father through Jesus. John relays Jesus's message: '...the rest of the dead lived not again until the thousand years were finished' (Revelation 20:5).

[note: the first sentence of v.5 clearly should follow v.6]

Literally billions have lived without hearing the gospel message, having since Adam been cut off from God. (God had been in a relationship only with Israel

Amos 3:2.) Yet God's desire is that *all* have the opportunity to be part of His plan: '...The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance' (II Peter 3:9).

The General Resurrection

In this phase of the plan—represented by the last day of the feast of *Tabernacles*—they will be raised in a material body of flesh and blood to face judgment: '...I saw the dead cont'd p.6

Civilisation in Decay

Christianity is tough. Early believers were constantly at risk—initially from compatriots within Judaism, then from official Rome. The greatest threat, however, was the all-pervading corrupt moral environment that all but smothered the ancient world.

The New Testament, corroborating the contemporary secular authors, bears testimony to the foul practices that were endemic worldwide. It was out of such a debased and diseased culture that many early Christians were drawn—and a culture that sought to distract them from the high principles exemplified by Jesus of Nazareth.

The apostle Paul sums up that culture: ‘...*Know you not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God*’ (1 Corinthians 6:9-10). He concludes with the clincher: ‘... *and such were some of you*’ (v.11). That was their environment.

Writing to the brethren at the heart of the Empire, in Rome, he describes the debauched and destructive practices then indulged almost universally: ‘...*God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature: and likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompence of their error which was meet*’ (Romans 1:26-27). Society had degenerated to such an extent that even pederasty, abortion and exposure of new-borns was accepted as ‘normal’ in almost every nation. Paul summarizes to the Ephesian

church, in another debauched city: ‘...*it is a shame even to speak of those things which are done of them in secret*’ (Ephesians 5:12).

[Perhaps a reference to the obscene *Bacchanalia/Saturnalia*.] The early church was a bright beacon in a dark world. How, then, did the church degenerate from those original golden days of belief?

The Human Family

Soon after creation man’s concept of our origin evolved from the knowledge of one God to a belief in natural forces, *eg* the sun, man and the lower animate life (Romans 1:23). By choosing to reject God and His counsel they erred, so God left men to their own devices.

A successful society needs stability, widely acknowledged as provided by the family structure as instituted by the Creator. This, too was rejected and a variety of substitutes evolved (Genesis 6:4).

With the loss of this structure the role of parental guidance based on the true faith was grossly undermined leading to widespread violence and the awesome judgment of the great Flood (v.5). When the core principles of that faith (summarized in the ‘Ten Commandments’) are undermined the scenario described by Paul envelops nations and individuals.

Century Twenty-one

The benign light shed on mankind by the coming of Jesus has percolated most nations, thus saving mankind from total destruction. The underlying philosophy that drives the modern world turns this blinding light into gross darkness: ‘...*Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!*’ (Isaiah 5:20).

Once-enlightened governments

now openly flout the divine laws of life legislating for the abominations that fatally undermined the ancient world. The fundamental divine pattern for the family is being tossed aside in favour of a Pandora’s box of perverted sterile and damaging relationships while the unrestricted shedding of innocent blood in the womb is legalized. Non-Christian idolatrous faiths are encouraged, and symbols of ancient Baal worship openly displayed in public and in private.

Downhill Trek

The godly principles that once underpinned Western society—and spread worldwide largely through the influence of the teachings of Jesus Christ and the Bible—no longer exert their former influence on society. The teachings of Scripture are no longer a force for morality and are alien to most children.

As in ancient Rome, gross immorality is accepted as ‘normal’ by the broadcast and written media and by on-screen entertainment, and forms the opinions and behaviour of people at large.

Criminality—*theft, fraud, violence, corporate corruption*—is rife. Rampant immorality—*adultery, pornography, paedophilia, homosexuality, promiscuity*—corrupts the nations, aided and abetted by legislation. The marriage bond is despised, divorce simplified, and the purpose of human sexuality forgotten.

Christian Be Alert!

Such a moral environment undermines the national foundations as corruption begets corruption. It is in face of this that the fledgling Christian must strive to survive. Jesus warned that before he returns ‘...*the love of many will grow cold*’, that for many deep spiritual roots would not develop, that the ordinary distractions of life would easily entangle us and block the path to eternity (*see* Matthew *ch* 13).

The true Christian life is indeed a challenge. The stupendous reward is for those who in such an environment remain faithful to Jesus. **Ω**

‘...with what body?’

It’s a question posed to the apostle Paul—and still puzzles many: ‘...some man will say, *How are the dead raised up? and with what body do they come?*’ (I Corinthians 15:35)

Jesus tells us that ‘...all in their graves will come forth’ (John 5:28). So how could that be? Can’t even bones decay with age, get scattered? What’s left to resurrect? Of course, it’s not an issue with most in Christendom, for isn’t the ‘immortal soul’ wafted to heaven immediately on death—the substance of most funeral orations? But if that is true then surely there is no need for a resurrection. And if no resurrection then Christianity is a sham—our faith is useless (I Corinthians 15:14-17).

But, continues Paul, ‘...now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept [ie, have died in Christ]’ (v.20). A crowd of over five hundred had met with him (v.6), as had the Twelve on numerous occasions during six weeks of post-resurrection teaching (Acts 1:3).

In the Grave

Jesus is the first to transform from a physical to a spirit body. He is the firstborn of many. What’s going on, then, between when we die and when we are raised from

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unsigned articles are by the Editor

the grave? The Scriptures are clear that even the most righteous don’t, when they die, have any interaction with God: ‘...in death there is no remembrance of you: in the grave who shall give you thanks?’ (Psalm 6:5). Nor can you praise Him: ‘...The dead praise not the LORD, neither any that go down into silence’ (Psalm 115:17). As King Solomon sums it up: ‘...the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not any thing’ Ecclesiastes 9:5). So—what is going on?

In God’s Image

Mankind was created by divine fiat from the soil under our feet, from the elements found in it. As such he differs little from the lower creation. Indeed humans and animals and sea-creatures are all (Hebrew) *nephesh*, ‘living creatures’.

However, mankind—male and female—alone in creation is created in God’s image (Genesis 1:27). But common to all species is *ruach*, spirit, even in the tiniest insect. It’s the ‘operating instructions’, the programme for every activity, and imprinted in its unique DNA.

The patriarch Job calls this added element in humans the ‘*spirit in man*’ (ch 32:8 and mentioned frequently throughout the Scriptures). It is breathed into us by God, is subject to destruction (God alone is immortal) and is a separate entity from the body, as is clear from the restoration to life of Jairus’s daughter: ‘...her spirit came again, and she arose straightway: and he commanded to give her food’ (Luke 8:53-55).

We don’t know if the human spirit passes into God’s presence, but we know it is in His care, in a state called *sheol* (Heb) and *hades* (Gk), until it is resurrected—and

Hell

The Scriptures use the down-to-earth symbolism of the ‘graves being opened’ as the resurrection is taking place. But, of course, many dead are buried elsewhere or indeed not at all (fires, decay etc). [*Then t’worms will come and eat thee oop’.*]

In fact, the unconscious human spirit departs the body at death and ‘...returns to God who gave it’ who reserves it in safety until the time of the resurrection.

Their resting-place is *sheol*, *hades*—where Jesus went when he died (Acts 2:31).

hades (KJV: *hell*) refers to a place of burial and also to the state of the human spirit after death. It is where the departed spirit of every human being since Adam rests (‘...asleep’).

As a ‘grave’ it could be at sea, in the earth or a sepulchre or similar. As a resting-place for the human spirit, good and bad, *hell* is somewhere in God’s care.

united with a body (Ecclesiastes 12:7).

With What Body?

Christians are assured that ‘...it doesn’t yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him’ (I John 3:2). As wrote the apostle Paul: ‘... [Christ] shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself’ (Philippians 3:21).

That’s awesome—to return from the grave in a new body; not our old corruptible one but a body that is no longer subject to pain, nor to decay and death,

and, when appropriate, shining like the resurrected Jesus. A body that is powerful, that exercises the full range of spiritual gifts, that is not constrained by physical objects.

A Real Body

It's a body that has *substance*—as witnessed by the post-resurrection appearance to the disciples. Jesus suddenly appeared before them in a locked room, and not as a disembodied spirit. As he tells them: '*...a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see I have*' and he then invited them to touch him (Luke 24: 36-43). Paul notes: '*...as we bore the image of the earthy man [Adam], we shall also bear the image of the heavenly Man [Christ]*' (I Corinthians 15:49).

The apostle adds '*...It is sown a natal .pseuchikos] body, it is raised a spiritual [Gk. pneu- matikos] body; there is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body*' (v.44). Not some kind of wraith, not a disembodied spirit, not a ghost! They will be visible but inherently shining as does Christ. Capable, as was the risen Jesus, of eating and drinking (Acts 10:41). Their bodily substance able to penetrate the material (Luke 24:36).

The return of Jesus will be to an earth decimated by man's destructive activity and by the judgments of the LORD. A remnant of Israel will return to the land of promise in shock but in repentance. The resurrected saints will be assigned and empowered to supervise the refurbishing of our planet, to rebuilding the waste places, to implementing the divine legal, administrative and economic systems, to preventative health and environmental care. All under the loving guidance of him in whom is hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, Jesus Christ.

The resurrected saints, clothed in their spirit body, will be visible to this remnant, tangible: '*...yet shall not your teachers be removed into a corner any more, but your eyes shall see your teachers*' (Isaiah 30:20) Ω

Panorama...cont'd from p. 3
small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works (Revelation 20:11-13).

Their spirit has been in God's care since they died (Ecclesiastes 12:7), awaiting this resurrection. Free of Satan's influence (II Corinthians 4:4) they are free to choose to become yoked to Jesus Christ, through him to become part of God's family.

All are resurrected in turn: '*... every man in his own order [in succession]*' (I Corinthians 15:23), wrote Paul—possibly raised generation by generation.

Second Death: an end

Recall that the human spirit is not inherently immortal; that's solely a divine characteristic. Should any then choose to live outside a relationship with the Father, after time to consider (a time of judgment), they will lose their life after the manner of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-10), having, like them, fallen before a challenge to their character. Their now-decaying bodies will be disposed of by fire: '*... death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire*' (Revelation 20:14-15, Malachi 4:1-3).

A New Beginning

All humanity will thus have been given the free choice of fulfilling their part in the divine plan. All will now be eternally alive as spirit beings: '*...Then comes the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have put down all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign, till he has put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death*' (I Corinthians 15:24-26). Ahead is the timeless and limitless world of spirit—a world typified by the *eighth day* of the autumn festival of Tabernacles.

And what an awesome time that will be! For we are told that God the Father will Himself be established on planet earth. In vision the apostle John '*...saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea. And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband*' (Revelation 21:1-2).

A Mystery

The 'bride', the church, is the divinely-appointed body by which men and women are now being prepared for their role in that Kingdom. That future is, for now, something of a mystery. The apostle Paul, however, gives us an insight: '*...as it is written, Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God has prepared for them that love him. But God has revealed them unto us by his Spirit*' (I Corinthians 2:9-10).

To serve with the Creator God for ever —*what a future!* Ω

Foundations

Should You Be Baptized?

Across most Christian denominations baptism is seen as the “admission ticket” to the faith. Is it free? Or is a response required?

Baptism is one of the “rites of passage” in many religions, not least in Christianity. The rite was practiced, for example, by the Sumerians (3rd millennium BC). It was integral to those embracing Judaism. And, of course, is particularly known to the Christian world through “John the Baptizer”. Jesus, himself baptized by John, commanded his disciples “...going, therefore, disciple all nations, baptizing them...” (Matthew 28:19). And from the earliest beginnings of the Christian church the rite was enjoined on all converts to the faith. The apostle Peter on the first Christian Pentecost urged his hearers to “...repent, and be baptized” (Acts 2:38).

In Roman Catholicism baptism is one of the seven “sacraments”, and is administered almost always shortly following the birth of a child into a Catholic family. Most denominations today baptize infants. But it wasn’t always so. Peter’s hearers, for example, were mature adults.

Lesson From History

During the first couple of centuries of the Christian faith, baptism of adults was the sole practice. To become a Christian was a serious life choice. Jews who accepted Jesus as the Messiah were ostracized from the community, with loss of job, status, family ties. They were even beaten in the synagogues. Peter’s hearers

were entirely Jews (or proselytes) gathered from around the world in Jerusalem for the age-old festival of Pentecost. They were totally committed to the divinely revealed faith of Israel - to the observance of the weekly Sabbath and the annual holy days (see Leviticus 23) and to the precepts of the “Law of Moses”. But something was missing.

At Sinai, some fifteen hundred years before Jesus’ birth, Israel had entered into a covenant with God. They would, in return for obedience to God, be “a special treasure to Me above all people” and they would be *...a kingdom of priests and a holy nation*” (Exodus 19:1-8).

As a nation, they failed to keep their side of the covenant and lost God’s protection. The separate House of Israel and the House of Judah were taken from the land of promise and exiled to Assyria and Babylon. Only the House of Judah returned, and chastened by seventy years of exile they were diligent in observing the Law. But the general ethos of the nation in the time of Jesus - as today - was one of outward observance. Just as today, there was lip service paid to “being good”. But the hearts of most people festered with self-serving which surfaced in violence, greed, oppression, tax fraud, aberrant sexual behaviour. John, Jesus - and the apostles - challenged this.

Change of Heart

The challenge of the teaching of Jesus demanded a fundamental change of heart. Not just the outward obedience of the Ten Commandments but a new personal relationship with the Law-giver.

The guilt associated with all human sin could, in Israel, be removed through the tiresome

round of divinely prescribed animal sacrifices. But these could never bring forgiveness: “...For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sin” (Hebrews 10:4).

The awfulness of human sin demanded a greater sacrifice. But now in Jesus, the divine representative, all sin could be forgiven. He is “...the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).

God’s Grand Design

In further revealing God’s grand design for mankind, Jesus unveiled a new covenant. Now the same divine Law would no longer be written on stones but in the human heart. The power that enabled Jesus to live in perfect harmony with the heavenly Father was now - through his sinless life, death and resurrection - made available to humankind. God would dwell in us by means of His Spirit and we could literally become His sons and daughters, and brothers and sisters of Jesus His Son.

But it required “repentance” - a genuine sorrow for our transgression of the divine Law which results in a changed life. Repentance demands mature reflection on past and present behaviour. It demands an understanding of “sin”. It demands a readiness to count the awesome cost of discipleship - to the point of martyrdom, if need be.

It required, too, the knowledge that only the sacrifice of “the Lamb of God” - Jesus of Nazareth, God’s appointed victim - was sufficient to bear away all the sin of mankind.

Baptism, then, is possible only for someone of mature mind.

A Watery Grave

In the Scriptures there is but one form of baptism. That's by the submerging of the repentant individual in water. The apostle Paul describes it as a watery grave: "...Do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him through baptism into death" (Romans 6:1-11). And emerging from this watery grave - we would drown if we stayed under the waters! - is symbolic of our resurrection as "...a new creature in Christ" (vv.4-5). Mere sprinkling - or hosing - fails to convey this significance!

Rising out of the water, every sin has been forgiven. We are clean! The Lamb of God, Jesus of Nazareth, has taken all the sin of each of us upon himself through his suffering and his sacrificial death on the hill of *Golgotha* - "the place of the skull". His life blood, lanced by a Roman spear, poured from his lacerated body.

Until Jesus returns (unlike the sacrifice of the Passover which will be observed after he comes back), baptized Christians annually observe a memorial of his suffering and death in the Lord's Supper '...on the night he was betrayed' (I Corinthians 11: 20-26).

Also significant in baptismal symbolism is the concept of being washed - again perfectly represented by immersion. Paul was confronted by Jesus for persecuting believers. He said: "...Arise and be baptized [Gk: immersed], and wash away your sins" (Acts 22:16, Hebrews 10:22). The water here is symbolic of Christ's blood shed for us: "...to him who loved us and washed us from our sins in his own blood" (Revelation 1:5).

Your Choice

Every one of us - all mankind - has "fallen short of the glory of God". His plan for each of us is that we share in His glory - a process that requires we become spiritually mature. By nature God is absolutely pure, and none of us can enter the divine Family loaded with our sin. God's love for us has in Jesus the Messiah provided a path to forgiveness. In baptism we acknowledge our determination to change our inborn hostility to God and His law ("repentance"), emerging from the water clean in His eyes through the righteousness of Jesus.

God's "glory" is not some ethereal pie-in-the-sky. He offers us the choice of extinction - or of living for ever in partnership with Him as joint-heirs with Jesus Christ in a real material universe in which the divine plan will develop endlessly.

The example of Jesus, himself immersed by John, and the example of the practice of the early church confirms that baptism

is the prescribed path into the Body of Christ, his church. It is symbolic of our death to the 'old man' - that nature we brought into the world with us. It is symbolic of our 'resurrection' as a new creation in Christ. It is symbolic of the washing away of our sin - our falling short of the glory of the Creator - in the shed blood of our Saviour.

If you are willing to pay the heavy price of discipleship, you must counsel about baptism. Each of us is faced with a stark choice of living for ever - or death.

God wants you to choose life! Ω

THINK!

The early IBM motif 'Think!' appears to be lost in the modern world, a world verging on insanity as millions unthinkingly cower behind masks and subject themselves to the global thought police.

A pandemic of anxiety stalks the planet induced by the projected fear of a condition now seen as no more serious than many common winter infections. It is a fear that has undermined economies worldwide and in the grip of which countless lives have been disrupted, and has induced an epidemic of physical and mental health problems.

Ill-advised governments—all, and strangely, with the same simultaneous 'solutions'—have imposed a range of totalitarian restrictions that limit our freedoms and send us scurrying in search of a place of safety. In such a compliant state of mind we are more likely to accept such solutions no matter how bizarre or restrictive.

Red Lines

Those with strongly-held beliefs (Christians, for example) will inevitably sooner or later be faced with a red line—to obey God or to submit to authoritarian dictates. Will we join the honourable roll of those who remained faithful in face of such persecution—or will we comply, to our eternal self-destruction? Ω

CALLING ALL INTERNET USERS!

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Be sure to take a look at
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MiniStudy**A Holy Convocation**

‘...let us consider one another, to incitement of love and of good works, not forsaking the assembling together of ourselves, as is the custom of some, but exhorting, and by so much more as you see the day drawing near’ (Hebrews 10:24-25)

‘...It is not good that man be alone’ (Genesis 2:18)

The corona pandemic has highlighted the vital importance of *community*. Deprived of face-to-face contact by the enforced ‘social distancing’ rules and by the ‘lockdowns’ and without ‘a shoulder to cry on’ a seeming epidemic of anxiety has infected whole populations, and increasing numbers have considered self-harm and even suicide. Indeed many *have* taken their own life. Extra millions of prescriptions for addictive anti-depressant drugs have been issued. A sense of fear grips many thus lowering resistance to illness

- Multiple streams feed this river of anxiety and fear. Always with us is the daily concern about living costs as prices across the board rise beyond our incomes. Access to health resources is a worry for many. The one-sided torrent of propaganda-style directives issued from governments worldwide in the vain attempt to eradicate a new respiratory disease or the equally futile attempts to stop the forces of nature as our climate begins a constantly recurring cycle of change. Many are also concerned as to the competence of those appointed to lead us to ‘green pastures’. Whether they are mired in sleaze or mentally incompetent or despotic—our confidence in them is low and our world appears to be lost in an impenetrable jungle of competing ideologies
- Mired in uncertainty spawned by our toxic environment and the conflicting guidance we seek solace—but we find ourselves isolated by the imposed restrictions. Cut off from care homes and sick relatives and deprived of social contacts—with even churches closed—serious health challenges developed
- Created in each of us is the desire for, indeed the need of, companionship: ‘...*Jehovah God said, It is not good, the man being alone. I will make a helper suited to him*’ (Genesis 2:18). Adam was created with the ability to communicate, the ability to reason, and his negative encounter with the animal creation (in naming them) impressed on him the need for someone intellectually and emotionally equal to himself with whom he could share life’s purpose. He records: ‘...*This now at last is bone from my bones, and flesh from my flesh. For this shall be called Woman, because this has been taken out of man. Therefore, a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife and they shall become one flesh*’ (vv.23-24) . It is a *family* relationship
- The weekly Sabbath, too, is vital in our relationships—with God and with man. It is a ‘holy convocation’: ‘...*Six days shall work be done: but the seventh day is the sabbath of rest, an holy convocation; you shall do no work therein*’ (Leviticus 23:3).:The people of God meet for fellowship, for guidance and instruction in the word, for praise and worship; It connects God and the family and fellow worshippers. Such convocations—on the weekly and annual sabbaths—developed as the synagogue in which the Levites instruct the people in the Law and its application to life
- The practice was continued in the New Testament church—brethren meet on the weekly Sabbath, a ‘holy convocation’ in which the brethren worship, interact and pray with one another and are taught the divine principles by mature competent teachers. Most of Paul’s letters address these local assemblies and their challenges
- The book of *Hebrews* highlights one of these challenges: ‘.....*let us consider one another, to incitement of love and of good works, not forsaking the assembling together of ourselves, as is the custom of some, but exhorting, and by so much more as you see the day drawing near*’ (ch 10:24-25). Millions of Christians around the world meet on Sundays, but for the most part receive little understanding of God’s Word. For others the temptation of internet services and a warm home deprives them of this interaction and support of like-minded brethren and the opportunity to themselves share life’s experiences to benefit the brethren. (Others, of course, are understandably unable to meet because of illness *etc.*) Face-to-face encounter is an important key to our spiritual well-being and should be embraced where possible
- Prophesied is a time when there will come a ‘...*famine of the word*’. However distant in time that may be now is the time when we must all ‘...*put on the armour of God*’, not least by daily immersing ourselves in the Scriptures , perhaps guided by a Bible sturdy course

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www.tulsachurchofgod.net — www.tulsachurchofgod.org*

*Church of God, New Mexico, — 1:30 p.m. MST
www.cognm.org*

The above also offer online access to past sermon presentations.

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God's Grand Design

Selected — one by one

Enigma of the Seventh Day

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