

outreach

The Newsletter of the Churches of God, UK

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Matthew 28:19-20*

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Let There Be Light

It's dark, the middle of the night. You stumble around hoping to avoid obstacles, hands protecting your face. Then you reach the light switch - and safety. It's a not uncommon experience.

It's the same when we stumble through life and its multiple challenges. Left to ourselves we try this or that, and if it doesn't work we try something else. If ours was a wrong choice then we experience the inevitable consequences—like a fall in a darkened room. Oh for light!

Turn on the Light

How much more helpful would be some kind of guide to those challenges, something to shed a beam, focus a light, on our path, a manual for living. But mostly we muddle through an experience, oblivious to the best solution. It would be foolish, surely, to ignore such a guide!

Yet that's what we do, blinded often by prejudice or by macho arrogance—'*I don't need help*'. The light stays off and we stumble.

There is one sure illuminating source of enlightenment: '*...Your Word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path*'. So writes the Psalmist (119:105). He adds: '*...The entrance of Your Words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple*' (v.130). You don't know where to turn, what to do? Here is an infallible aide.

You may recall the words of Jesus in his 'sermon on the Mount': '*...Blessed are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness! For they shall be filled*' (Matthew 5:6). *Righteousness, right living*—now that's a promise from Jesus that all Christians will surely relish. And what is it?

Laws for Living

Observing God's commandments will never bring salvation—never has. Not now and not before Christ came on earth. Yet despite this, Jesus tells us to '*...hunger and thirst after righteousness*' (Matthew 5:6).

What, then, is 'righteousness'? Unsurprisingly, it is the practical application of God's guidance. Back again to the Psalmist: '*...all your commandments are righteousness*' (Psalm 119:172). Those laws—laws for living—are what shed light on our daily walk.

The Scriptures give sound and wise advice on our relationships, on our marriages, on child care, on our physical and mental health, on our finances, on our work ethic, on dealing with adversity, on keeping out of trouble. How to live life successfully, in other words—despite all it throws at us.

Perhaps surprisingly, then, all too many Christians, never mind others, decide to ignore this treasure-house of guidance. '*That's Old Testament stuff*', and '*nailed to the cross*' preach some. And thus they deny the words of Jesus: '*...Don't suppose that I came to do away with the Law and the Prophets. I did not come to do away with them, but to give them their full meaning. Heaven and earth may disappear. But I promise you that not even a period or comma will ever disappear from the Law. Everything written in it must happen*' (Matthew 5:17-18 CEV). Words from our Saviour that we cannot ignore!

It is perhaps summed up by the proverb: '*...When you see trouble coming, don't be stupid and walk right into it—be smart and hide*' (Proverbs 22:3)'. The Bible is the place to hide!

As important such practical advice may be, however, there's further—vital—guidance in the ***cont'd p.4***

Why Theology?

Does *theology* have any relevance for the Christian? Salvation sounds so simple. After all, Paul told his jailor: ‘...believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved’ (Acts 16:31). Yet even in this simple statement there’s clearly an element of theology. For example, how to define ‘believe’, or ‘salvation’.

The vast diversity of teachings within the Christian churches surely points to the need for some underpinning theology, an anchor in the storms of heresy! The apostle Paul certainly thought so, and addressed it in his every letter to the churches.

It’s a sad fact that all too many Christians simply take their Christianity ‘on faith’ - though more likely on the word of their priest or pastor. Yet that can lead to serious distortions of what the Scriptures—the Word of God—means for the individual.

When You Die

Here’s an example: look at one belief that is almost universal—not only in Christianity but in virtually every faith: *our final destiny*. Bad theology has distorted this fundamental teaching, causing heartache for many: ‘where has dear, departed, roguish Uncle Tom gone?’

The foundation for this belief concerning life after death is buried in the very beginning of human existence, and spread its diabolic tentacles through all races. Our first parents chose to believe a heinous lie—a lie that directly contradicted the guidance of the Creator.

The eternal God instructed His creation—saying, in essence, ‘...follow My guidance—or die as a consequence’ (Genesis 3:3). They thought they knew better and accepted an alien philosophy that promised unending life, even beyond the grave. So was born the false concept that mankind lives beyond our physical life, that we have an ‘immortal soul’—a concept foreign to the Word of God. No heaven, then, and no endless burning in hell when the last breath escapes us.

Know the theology and the horror of this belief is erased, replaced with a beautiful plan from the God who is all-consuming love—a plan that embraces all mankind of every race, every era. Ω

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A Godly Festival

A vast number from all religions—and, of course, notably Christianity—observe the annual festival now called Christmas, though with little or no emphasis on Christ. It’s a feast that has roots long before the time of Jesus, in whose birth the festival is so named.

Festivals designed as worship of the Creator are not new, and are observed by all faiths. Each season was celebrated by divine worship of some form, as uniquely prescribed by each ‘god’ - the ‘gods of the nations’. Indeed the Creator made provision for them even before man was created: ‘...God said, *Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to divide between the day and the night. And let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days and years*’ (Genesis 1:14).

Note the word *seasons*. In the Hebrew it is *mo’ed* and is what God called the festivals He later outlined to Moses (Leviticus 23)—festivals that are linked to the annual seasons. The festivals are also called *chag, a rejoicing* [related to the Islamic *haj, a pilgrimage*]. Indeed Moses, having been instructed by God, asked Pharaoh to release the Israelites to keep such a feast [Heb. *chag*] to ‘the God of Israel’ (Exodus 5:1).

Each of the seven Bible festivals represents an aspect of God’s purpose here on earth—‘shadows’ (pictorial reminders) of the reality. Paul advised the Colossian brethren not to let anyone judge them for observing them (Colossians 2:16).

As with the sacrifices associated with them—and any other ‘works’—the festivals in no way ‘buy or earn salvation’, which is entirely in God’s gift. They never have, never will! As with all God’s revealed will, we joyfully observe them in their seasons.

Despite lapses in the observance of the festivals by Israel, they remained part of the prescribed divine worship down the centuries—notably into the time of Christ, who faithfully observed them, as did his chosen apostles. Many events in the life of Jesus and in his church have revolved around the festivals. They also have prophetic significance.

The apostle Paul approvingly noted that the Christians in Corinth—many of whom were Gentiles—observed the *Days of Unleavened Bread*, a seven-day spring festival known as ‘the *Feast of the Passover*’ (I Corinthians 5).

To their shame, most Christians follow the example of ancient Israel: ‘...They feared the LORD, and served their own gods (II Kings 17:33). That is, they blended their worship of the Creator with the religious practices of the gods of the nations. Ω

For Those Who Serve

The *Lord's Supper* is a memorial that lies at the heart—in various guises—of every Christian denomination's observances, reminding us of the awesome sacrifice Jesus made so we could become part of the divine family.

It's an observance not to be entered into lightly. The apostle Paul had to take the Corinthian brethren to task—for they had allowed it to degenerate into a party, some even becoming intoxicated, while the poor were neglected (I Corinthians 11:21). He adds: *'..whoever shall eat this bread and drink this cup of the Lord unworthily [in an unworthy manner], he will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread and drink of that cup. For he who eats and drinks unworthily eats and drinks condemnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this cause many among you are weak and sickly, and many sleep'*.

It is likely that Paul's response to the unworthiness of the Corinthians was coloured by the circumstance that led to how Jesus reacted to the disciples at that pre-Passover supper (John 13:1). Luke tells us (*ch 22:24*) that there was at this time a dispute among the Twelve as to who was 'greatest'.

They arrived for this meal with this festering sore eating them up. When arriving for a meal it was common practice for a servant to wash the guests' feet—considered a lowly task. None of the disciples, with this competitive attitude, were willing to take on the task (they probably usually took turns).

Imagine their embarrassed silence when Jesus himself— their master, their rabbi, their lord—kneeled before them one by one and washed their feet. What an unforgettable lesson!

It was a lesson well-learned, as may be discerned from Peter's first letter (chapter 5). No hint of lording it over the brethren but a humble acceptance of his assigned role to 'shepherd the sheep', to serve the brethren.

After Jesus had tended to the needs of the disciples before his last supper with them, having

washed their feet he gently but powerfully rebuked them (John 13:12-17). Luke fills in another part of the conversation: *'...He said to them, The kings of the nations exercise lordship over them. And they who exercise authority on them are called benefactors. But you shall not be so: but the greater among you, let him be as the lesser, and he who governs, as one who serves. For which is the greater; he who reclines, or he who serves? Is it not he who reclines? But I am among you as He who serves'* (*ch 22:25-27*).

Surely a lesson for all who serve the people of God in whatever role—and especially in leadership. Ω

<i>Spring Festivals 2014</i>	
Lord's Supper:	April 13 Sun evg
Unleavened Bread:	April 15-21
Pentecost:	June 8

Letter from England

Greetings from Lincolnshire,

We often hear said of Jesus Christ that he was meek and mild—though this doesn't gel completely with his portrayal in the Bible. But he certainly was fully in control of himself even in the most terrible circumstances, only rarely expressing 'righteous anger'. And as demonstrated in that last meal he shared with his twelve disciples, he had perfect humility.

Probe into the details of his life, however rigorously, and there's nothing that can mar this view of him. He certainly wasn't covetous nor did he amass a fortune. He never killed anyone nor did he authorize his followers to use violence. He wasn't jailed for terrorist acts, or for inciting murder but on a trumped-up charge. When he died his disciples didn't take to the streets to rape and rob and kill and torture. (Though some, later, who took on his name, did.)

In short, he was the perfect rounded person, his entire life being a shining example to all of consistency, of love, of compassion - and of true forgiveness. A life to emulate, whether or not you are a Christian.

In all of history—and until he returns as the leader of the world—every leader is but a pygmy in comparison. Thousands, millions, may mourn without an inkling of the true character of an individual, or their destructive inheritance. As was said in another context, there was '... 'treachery with a smile on its face'.

'Woe to you when all men shall speak well of you!'
James

Let here Be Light *cont'd from p.1*

Scriptures that far transcends the mere very temporary physical aspects. For this life is not the end—beyond lies *eternity*. Far from being a God ‘far off’ who has lost interest in His creation, the God of the Bible is ceaselessly working out a plan to ‘...bring many sons to glory’, to share in His Family, His spirit Kingdom—through eternity. It, too, is in the Scriptures;

Plan for Eternity

It’s a phased plan. For, having given mankind freedom to choose—we are not automatons—He understands that since we early rejected His plan (read Romans 1:18-32) few are likely to respond to the Plan’s demands. One man, Abraham, did choose aright and God has worked through his descendants—Israel—to shed the light of His Word worldwide.

A few from all races have responded, have embraced the Plan, having heard the good news of salvation. The Father selected them and drew them to the Saviour, Jesus: ‘...No one can come to Me unless the Father who has sent Me draw him, and I will raise him up at the last day’ (John 6:44). Those fully committed (Matthew 7:14) will oversee, with the Messiah Jesus, the next phase of the Plan, when all obstacles to belief will be removed.

All of mankind can benefit their lives by applying those sound principles of living from the Scriptures – as do many Bible readers. They will be a protecting guide through our physical lifetime—but they stop short of being a ticket to eternity, to becoming a part of the eternal Kingdom of God, to salvation. That requires each of us to take a further, vital, step.

A Changed Heart and Mind

The apostle Peter sums it so: ‘...Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ to remission of sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit’ (Acts 2:38). Without Jesus Christ, the light of the world, there is no salvation. Without repentance—a changed heart—there is no forgiveness of sin, and no salvation. Without the indwelling Spirit there is no salvation.

Jesus urges us to ‘...live by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God’ (Matthew 4:4). We are to actively ‘put on Christ’—to be ‘transformed by the renewing of the mind’, to be ‘conformed to his image’. (The apostle Paul, in Colossians 3, gives examples of those changes.) Peter again: ‘...according to the Holy One who has called you, you also become holy in all conduct’ (I Peter 1:15). As said Jesus: ‘...be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect [mature, complete]’ (Matthew 5:48).

The Creator—who is consistent, unchanging, meticu-

Q. How is Hebrews 11:13 to be explained?

‘Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear [are visible]’ (Hebrews 11:3)

The following response must be classed as tentative—a possible explanation of a mystery!

The universe—space—existed from eternity as an invisible manifestation of the Spirit of God. To the human eye (if we had been there!) there was nothing. By a word from God (Genesis 1:1) a portion of this spirit ‘energy’ was organized to form the physical universe—what the scientists claim to be the ‘Big Bang’. Not created from ‘nothing’ but ‘framed’ from the invisible.

Paul, in Hebrews 11:3, uses the word *framed* (Gk. *katarizo*) which has the significance of ‘put in order, re-arrange’. Elsewhere he says: ‘...all things were created through Him [ie Jesus] and for Him. And He is before all things, and by Him all things consist’ (Colossians 1:16-17). Nehemiah says much the same: ‘...You have made the heavens, heaven of the heavens, with all their host, the earth, and all things on it, the seas, and all in them, and You preserve them all’ (ch.9:6). Everything holds together by his controlling power, is created at His will.

‘Visible matter’—planets, galaxies *etc*—occupies just 5% of space, the rest is known to cosmologists as ‘dark energy’ (68% of space) and ‘dark matter’ (27%). It is a conundrum for science, but perhaps God has in Hebrews 11 given us a clue.

How awesome is the majesty and power of the Creator and our Saviour—‘His power throughout the universe displayed’! Ω

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lous in His guidance—urges us to discard religious practices that He has not authorized: ‘...you shall be careful to do as Jehovah your God has commanded you. You shall not turn aside to the right hand or to the left. You shall walk in all the ways which Jehovah your God has commanded you so that you may live and that good may be to you’ (Deuteronomy 5:32-33).

‘there is no other name [Jesus] under Heaven given among men by which we must be saved’ Ω