

outreach

The New Horizons Newsletter

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Matthew 28:19-20

representing
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Churches Of God Outreach Ministries

Temptation...defeated! *Adversary] will give you, and the glory of them; for it has been delivered [yielded up] to me. And I give it to whomever I will' (Luke 4:6).*

How did he do it? How did Jesus resist the subtle wiles of the Adversary, exhausted and famished as he was after forty days without food in a howling wilderness? None of us will ever face such a horrendous trial—but there are lessons to learn.

Born at the time of God's choosing ('...in the fullness of time') Jesus had for thirty years a relatively quiet life, a life lived in perfect harmony with the *torah*. Until, that is, his baptism in the Jordan by John the Baptist—a man specifically chosen by God to prepare the people for his appearance.

At that moment Jesus was anointed with the fullness of the Holy Spirit and received the witness of the Father: '*...John bore record, saying, I saw the Spirit descending from Heaven like a dove, and He abode on Him*' (John 1:32). Or, as recorded by Luke: '*...the Holy Spirit came down in a bodily shape, like a dove on Him. And a voice came from Heaven, which said, You are My Son, the Beloved; I am delighted in You*' (Luke 3:22).

The Contest

At once Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness where he would face the Adversary in a contest for the crown—the control of the planet. The role was held by Satan since Adam, the original titleholder, lost the battle with him: '*...All this power I [Satan, the*

Adversary] will give you, and the glory of them; for it has been delivered [yielded up] to me. And I give it to whomever I will' (Luke 4:6).

Again—*how did he do it?* For Jesus emerged victorious and triumphant from this almighty contest. The Devil left, defeated—but only for '*...a little season*'.

Spiritual Armour

During almost six weeks without food Jesus was time and again harassed by the Devil (Luke 4:2). After those forty days the Devil mustered his final attempts to lure him to submit to his authority. It was a deceptively 'reasonable' request from Satan: '*...you are near death's door from your fasting—so turn these stones into bread*'.

The weaponry Jesus deployed against the Devil he has shared with all in whom he and the Father live. We, too, *can* conquer every temptation, every test we face. Like Jesus we can fight off '*...the wiles of the Devil*' (Ephesians 6:11) - by donning God's armour.

The principle is clear in Jesus's response to Satan's demands: '*...It is written, man shall not live by bread alone, but by every Word of God* (Luke 4:4). Underpinning his mission was this: '*...I have come down out of Heaven, not that I should do My will, but the will of Him who sent Me*' (John 6:38). Just as Israel was tested in the wilderness (Deuteronomy 8:1ff) so, too, was Jesus.

If he had submitted to the Devil's simple request, Jesus *cont'd page 4*

'Little Flock'

Jesus addressed his disciples (v.1) primarily following an encounter with the Pharisees: '*...Stop being afraid, little flock, because your Father was pleased to give you the kingdom*' (Luke 12:32). Now that's strange—for are there not some two billion Christian believers (so say the statistics)?

It's the received wisdom that the church would grow and grow to eventually encompass a global reach. But that's a concept foreign to the Scriptures. Certainly, in its beginnings the church of God had a surge of adherents—three thousand on the first Pentecost, many more later. It didn't last, however. But beginning with the early fourth century perhaps millions sewed on the 'Christian' label boosted by legislation from the Emperor Constantine.

Spiritual disease invaded the Body of Christ, and Christianity indeed became just a label, with the church leadership, stemming from Rome, absorbing the pagan culture of the Empire. Millions 'joined', for to become a Christian no longer became a hardship and a member needed only to use a 'Christian' label for their pagan practices.

Jesus, echoing the 'small flock' analogy, had warned about this: '*...Go in through the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and many are the ones entering in through it. For narrow is the gate, and constricted is the way that leads away into life, and few are the ones finding it*' (Matthew 7:13-14).

He then explains how the decay would arise: '*... But beware of the false prophets [teachers] who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inside they are plundering wolves*' (v.15). That's what happened. Over the ensuing centuries lives and fortunes were forcefully plundered by the church.

The official Christian church assumed the role of universality. The apostle Peter prophesied: '*... false prophets were also among the people, as also false teachers will be among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, and denying the Master who has bought them, bringing swift destruction on themselves. and many will follow their destructive ways, by whom the way of truth will be evil spoken of, And by covetousness, with well-turned words, they will use you for gain*' (II Peter 2:1-3).

next column

Letter from England

Hello to all our readers,

GDPR has been something of an eye-opener. As we haven't sent a renewal request for some time I expected that we would lose a considerable proportion of readers, both of *OUTREACH* and of *New Horizons* magazine.

There was, in fact, (so far) a pleasing 18% return on our *e-mail* address book, and 20% on *New Horizons*. I understand that in general mailings above 10% return are considered to be 'good'.

On the down side it is sad that so many have moved on from their initial interest. However, numbers don't count much with God. You will recall Gideon's three hundred stalwarts. As wrote Zechariah: '*...who has despised the day of small things?*' (ch 4:10). The prophet had earlier given God's message: '*...Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, says Jehovah of Hosts*' (v.6). [See 'Little Flock' on this page.]

We are conscious that while we in the *Outreach Ministries* seek to faithfully do a work for God, yet '*...If Jehovah does not build the house, they who build it labor in vain*' (Psalm 127:1). Waiting on Him must undergird our paltry efforts. We 'sow the seed of the Word' and wait for it to take firm root, seeking to nourish it through our literature and personal contact.

But it is God who 'gives the increase'; where He sees interest He works with the individual to lead them into His Spirit Kingdom—a definition of 'salvation'! We do what we consider to be our part, others add to that.

If you have simply forgotten to consent to receive our mailings—or wish to reconsider—then please let us know as this may be our final notice.

James

To be—and remain—a Christian faithful to Jesus and his way of life demanded commitment. No surprise, then, that the body of the faithful remained 'few'. Jesus's parable of the sower should be a red flag, as so much 'seed' was wasted or never bore mature fruit. Hadn't the Master told us to expect to lose friends, even family members?: '*I [Jesus] came to divide a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a bride against her mother-in-law. "Ones hostile to the man shall be those of his own house." The one loving father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And the one loving son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me*' (Matthew 10:35-37).

It takes guts and determination to follow Jesus '*...wherever he leads*'. There's no traction to the mantra 'only believe'.

Ω

Insight from Paul

The apostle Paul's letters shed a bright light on our walk with God

Given the physical and mental trauma he experienced throughout his ministry, the apostle Paul surely looked forward to his pain-free resurrection body:

'...we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle [our flesh] were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands [our resurrected spirit body], eternal in the heavens. For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven: If so be that being clothed we shall not be found naked. For we that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened [by our inadequacies]: not for that we would be unclothed [die], but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life' (II Corinthians 5:1-4).

He describes this future state for us in chapter fifteen of his first letter to the Corinthians. The 'earthly house' [Gk *soma psuchikon*] is our present physical body which will in time 'dissolve', leaving our (inert) human spirit which returns to God's safe keeping. Then, for all those who are 'in Christ', comes a resurrection—the return to life but on a spirit plane. We—that is, our human 'spirit in man'—will be clothed with a spirit body [Gk. *soma pneumatikon*], a body that will be like the resurrection body of Jesus: *'... we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is'* (I John 3:2).

The human 'spirit in man' is mortal—for only God has immortality (I Timothy 6:16). We must 'put it on' (I Corinthians 15:53)

A key to our understanding is that oft-used expression of his—'in Christ': *'...There is therefore now no condemnation to those in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to flesh, but according to Spirit'* (Romans 8:1). It is an expression fundamental to our understanding of *who* will be resurrected in that spirit body. Simply being a church-goer or a great philanthropist or holding a church office or having the kind of faith in yourself that drives you to move a mountain or being an innocent baby won't suffice.

You *must* be '...in Christ'. You must have made that mature emotional and rational commitment to serve him, to go wherever he leads you. Ω

Data Protection

As part of the new *Data Protection* regulations we are required to have your consent to hold your mailing details. Thanks to all who have already responded.

This is the final on-line mailing of OUT-REACH to our existing mailing list. If you haven't yet responded and now wish to give your consent please let us know as soon as possible Thank you.

'...I stand at the door'

Perhaps unsurprisingly, more and more believers are ignoring 'church' attendance and assembling in small groups to study the Scriptures and for fellowship. *Barna Group* estimate 20m attend a house church weekly in the United States (not associated with a large church). But mainstream church attendance has plummeted. Something isn't right.

More members stop attending than are recruited, and analysts list many factors: time pressure, wide internet access to Bible study, varied leisure pursuits, immigration (though some immigrants are *more* 'religious'), secularism.

Individual congregations have, with varying success, introduced a variety of innovations in an attempt to boost membership: trendy rock or country music, varied service times, name changes (avoid 'school', 'study' *etc*), soup kitchens, shorter sermons.

Yet other churches have congregations of multiple thousands! We could cite Houston's Lakewood (43,500) or Saddleback in California (22,400) or Willow Creek in Illinois (23,400). Have they found a missing key?

Church Profile

Perhaps, though, low attendance should not always be a cause for concern. The message of Jesus is available to all mankind, but he reckoned his true followers would be a *'...little flock'* (Luke 12:32). To his followers he said: *'...narrow is the gate, and constricted is the way that leads away into life, and few are the ones finding it'* (Matthew 7:14).

The reason? To follow him—and contrary to popular opinion—is a hard choice. Many 'fall by the way-side', distracted by a range of diversions: family pressures, finances, false expectations, failure to 'count the cost' of discipleship—and, not least, the spiritual fog imposed by Satan: *'...the god of this age has blinded the thoughts of the unbelieving, so that the brightness of the gospel of the glory of Christ who is the image of God, should not dawn on them'* (II Corinthians 4:4). The 'word of the Kingdom' simply doesn't take firm root.

Christianity is professed by over two billion—surely not a 'small flock' by any means! It's a message not much embraced by the churches, as they increasingly sink into the swamp of the 'social gospel' and attract 'rice Christians', defined as *'...a convert to Christianity who accepts baptism not on the basis of personal conviction but out of a desire for food, medical services, or other benefits'*. Or, for the fellowship that is often associated with a group.

When the Gospel is proclaimed in its fullness, however few will embrace it. Yet that is what Jesus required: *'...teaching them to observe all things, whatever I commanded you'* (Matthew 28:20). It is a life-saving challenge to all who hear. Ω

Failed Jurisprudence

Violence has plagued the human race almost from its beginning, and nations have always sought to minimize it. Hence a stream of laws have been variously formulated to cope (eg the Hammurabi Code).

'Being religious' is no barrier—witness Buddhist against Muslim in Myanmar. Muslim against Muslim worldwide, Muslim against 'Christian' in Africa and vice-versa, Hindu v. Hindu. Yet it seems to escalate. In the top 25, the 'accolade' for murder goes to Honduras with 90 per 100,000, while No 25 is Panama. But violent tendencies lurk in every heart—it is just a matter of control, individually or, failing that, by the State.

Divine Right

The 'divine right of kings' no longer bothers modern Western governments, but the Creator has indeed delegated the control of nations to the national leadership—whatever form the people choose—and they will experience the consequences of how it is applied: '*...Everyone must obey state authorities, because no authority exists without God's permission, and the existing authorities have been put there by God. Whoever opposes the existing authority opposes what God has ordered; and anyone who does so will bring judgment on himself*' (Romans 13:1-2). (There is a caveat—Acts 5:29).

Democracy is considered best by many, but it doesn't suit the temperament of every people group. Saudi Arabia has only a fraction of the criminality rife in the United States—murders *per* hundred thousand population rate in the latter, for example, is forty-nine times that of Saudi. But try to impose the rigours of Sharia Law in 'the 'land of the free'!

There is in that statistic, however, a hint as to how to curb crime in view of our widespread criminality. Wise King Solomon has this to say, as relevant as ever: '*...Where sentence on an evil work is not executed speedily, on account of this the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil*' (Ecclesiastes 8:11). Trials often drag on sometimes for a lifetime without resolution, and many crimes don't even come to trial, with at least 70% of criminals re-offending.

There's another vital principle – *equitable justice*, based on the assumption that everyone is entitled to a peaceful life untroubled by fellow-humans. All deviation from that principle of 'normality' merited a degree of correction, whether it was theft or unruly children or corrupt practices or infidelity or violence up to murder. An example is in Deuteronomy 21:18-20: '*...Suppose someone has a son who is stubborn and rebellious, a son who will not obey his parents, even though they punish him. His parents are to take him before the leaders of the town where he lives and make him stand trial. They are to say to them, 'Our son is stubborn and rebellious and refuses to obey us; he wastes money and is a drunkard'*'.

Temptation...from p.1

would have undermined his total commitment to always submit to the will of the Father, for that would be sin. To that end his every response was *from God's Word*. He fought, as must we, with '*...the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God*' Ephesians 6:17. As wrote James, the Lord's brother: '*...become doers of the Word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves*' (James 1:22).

Know God's Will

The implication, then, is that *we* come to know what is that will of the Father! Paul to the Roman church: '*...be not conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, in order to prove by you what is the good and pleasing and perfect will of God*' (Romans 12:2).

In those darkest hours just before his crucifixion, in an agony in Gethsemane Jesus cried out: '*...not my will but yours be done*'. He conquered the enemy of mankind: '*...as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil*' (Hebrews 2:14). With Christ in us we, too, can conquer all temptations, all tests of character. If we apply his Word Ω

Yes—way back then they had their share of violent drunken thugs. And they dealt with it—up to (rarely) judicial execution (v.21). But today our 'snowflake' leadership dare not lay a finger on the criminal—apart from 'a slap on the wrist'.

The Gold Standard

Clearly, to define 'normal' there must be foundation principles from which to deviate. *But who says?* Modern jurisprudence dictates that it is whatever whim Congress or Parliament decides – whoever has the loudest voice or the deepest pocket. Whatever seems good, or will keep us in office, or (occasionally) please the electorate. Wrote the Psalmist: '*...If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do?*' (Psalm 11:3).

Mankind at our beginning was given an instruction manual, with guidance tailored to our physical and psychological well-being. Developing nations were free to formulate their own legal code based on that manual and to apply them equitably. When the Israelite clans became a nation (c.1500BC) the LORD presented them with the foundation principles (codified as the Ten Commandments) and perfectly tailored to guide human behaviour: '*...No other nation, no matter how great, has laws so just as those that I have taught you today*' (Deuteronomy 4:8).

Modern nations are in peril to the degree they diverge from that fundamental Law. Few homes do not have a copy of this Law, at least in a drawer—the Bible. Dust it off and apply it in your own life. Ω