

outreach

The Newsletter of the Churches of God, UK

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Matthew 28:19-20

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The 'Seven' Enigma

Bible students are familiar with the concept that the number *seven* has special significance to God in relation to mankind. At this time of year it is highlighted in the Scriptures.

There is a recurring pattern of 'sevens' which bind together the various strands of the tapestry of the divine plan for us. They recur in our worship—but have serious practical implications for all of mankind.

Divine Worship

Just one aspect of God's revealed worship has been retained within Christianity at large—Whit-sunday, held in late May. It is a remnant of what in the Bible is called the *Feast of Weeks*, and in the New Testament, *Pentecost*.

Pentecost simply means 'fiftieth' and derives from the former term, *Feast of Weeks*. Beginning (early Spring) with the offering in the Temple of a sheaf of the first-ripe barley, seven weekly Sabbath days were counted and the following day—the fiftieth—was Pentecost (Leviticus 23:15).

[Christians are familiar with the word because it is seen as the 'birthday' of the church, as recorded in Acts 2. Thousands were baptized that day, and the tradition later arose of dressing in white for baptism—hence 'Whit(e)' Sunday.]

Pentecost, however is just one of *seven* divinely appointed festivals God gave for His worship— each with personal and prophetic sig-

nificance. They are listed in Leviticus 23. Each of these 'sabbaths' is a time to assemble with like-minded brethren for instruction from the Scriptures and for fellowship.

Pattern of Sevens

We have, then, the seven day week, the seven weeks leading to Pentecost, seven annual festivals. Two of these festivals last seven days.

The pattern is developed further with every seventh year set aside as a 'sabbatical'. Seven of these sabbaticals (forty-nine years) lead to a celebratory fiftieth year—the Jubilee (Leviticus 25: 8ff).

Consequences

The practical application of these sabbaticals by the nations would lead to economic and social stability, and peace with our neighbours (Leviticus 26:2-12). And the reverse—as we are now experiencing—economic turmoil, disturbed weather, unwise government, loss of sovereignty (vv. 14-34).

Ancient Israel experienced this sorry cycle, called in Scripture 'seven times punishment'. It is the natural consequence of our failure to observe the 'Law of Sevens' (vv. 2-3, 43).. The final—the seventh—cycle is national destruction and exile (vv.33-34). For ancient Israel this continued seventy years (Jeremiah 25:11). Ω

Pentecost 2012
Sunday May 27

ARE YOU DEAF?

That's a question I—and I'm sure many of our readers—have as a child heard from a parent. And in later life, the 'declining years', the question may be yelled by one spouse or the other. As Solomon writes: '*...the sound of the grinding is low*'!

Jesus was concerned about hearing: '*...If any man have ears to hear, let him hear*' (Mark 4:23 *etc*). He clearly expected some of his audience to be deaf—deaf to his message.

It's no less so in our day. For despite the billions expended on 'evangelism' few truly respond—even to the easy Gospel purveyed by the churches. We might ask *why*?

Check the following: *is the cause of your spiritual deafness on the list?*

- too busy with life to listen
- deafened by false teaching from the pulpit and/or the internet
- view the Christ Way as too difficult
- don't wish to alienate family and friends
- unconcerned about the inevitable 'judgment to come'

The LORD had a similar challenge with ancient Israel. They demonstrated their unwillingness to follow His ways despite forty years of miraculous deliverances, so Moses remonstrated: '*...the LORD has not given you an heart to perceive, and eyes to see, and ears to hear, unto this day*'. (Deuteronomy 29:4). Don't do as God requires, don't react to His goads, in other words, and you will be deaf to His message.

God doesn't want anyone to miss out on His invitation to become a son or daughter in His ever-expanding Family. But He will only accept those who respond to the terms of sonship as recorded in the Scriptures.

Help to Hear

Too many stumble on the truth of Jesus' teaching—and pick themselves up as if nothing happened. Should you discern a small spark of interest in the hereafter, a whispered voice in your ear, fan the spark into a flame by opening God's Word—and listen carefully to its message. Ω

The Resurrection

The resurrection from the dead is the Christian's hope. Where does it fit into the end of the age? Books galore try to pin-point the moment, and indeed the data can be confusing.

The 'pattern of sevens' [*see* page 1] provides a framework for end-time events—not only from the Book of the Law but also from the writings of the New Testament.

The apostle Paul details the time: '*... I shew you a mystery; 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). Notice *when*. We too often read over this time element, perhaps seeing it a some kind of word picture.

The resurrection of the saints occurs suddenly '*...at the last trump[et]*'. That's a point in time, and it's left to John, at the end of the first century, to develop the fact as revealed by Jesus and recorded in the book of Revelation.

John reveals a framework for the last days:

- end-time events are divided into *seven* epochs culminating in the return of Jesus, and called 'seals' [of a scroll], each reflecting a series of events as predicted by Jesus [*see* Matthew 24]
- the fifth seal represents what is widely known as 'the great tribulation', during which Christians will also be killed
- the final seal is in turn portrayed as a series of *seven* angelic interventions in human affairs, pictured as the blowing of trumpets. It is a time of environmental destruction
- at the *last* of these trumpet blasts, the *seventh*, is the resurrection of the saints, as stated by Paul
- at some time following this resurrection there are a series of *seven* final judgments (God's wrath) in the presence of Jesus on unrepentant rebellious mankind—the 'seven plagues'—culminating at the *seventh* plague in a world-wide destructive earthquake and the cry '*...it is done*' Ω

Insight from Paul

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

Character

The goal of each and every committed Christian is to become like Jesus Christ. Writes Paul to the Ephesian brethren: *'...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)*. That's a given. We could define that goal as 'the development of perfect character as portrayed by Jesus'. But how do we get there?

We define the Christian as one in whom dwells the Spirit of God (Romans 8:9), and to have been given that Spirit signifies that we have made a conscious decision to submit to Him *'...the Holy Spirit, whom God hath given to them that obey him' (Acts 5:32)*. And that demands effort. It requires multiple acts of will as we daily face choices based on God's revealed Word.

Among those decisions are some with which we can't cope dependant solely on our own in-born inner resources. We can, however *'...come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need' (Hebrews 4:16)*.

The Father has a vision for each of us as individuals, and when He looks at His children He focuses on our character. Paul summarizes: *'... Anyone who belongs to Christ is a new person. The past is forgotten, and everything is new (II Corinthians 5:17 CEV)*.

He describes the process: *'...the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord' (ch 3:17)*.

Paul reflects the words of the prophet Isaiah: *'... O LORD, thou are our father; we are the clay, and you our potter; and we all are the work of your hand' (Isaiah 64:8)*. It has been the Father's plan from eternity: *'...For it became him, for whom are all things, and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings' (Hebrews 2:10)*. Ω

Letter from England

Hello from Lincolnshire

There's no escaping the fact that the way of life taught by Jesus is hard. Commit to him and we are committed to root and branch change. It may lead to alienation from family and friends, even our job may be at stake.

The apostle Paul sums it up: *'...be not conformed to this world: but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God' (Romans 12:2)*. Influenced by God's indwelling Spirit the way we think changes. Our perspective on the world changes and we learn to see life from a God's eye view. Our behaviour is gradually molded into 'a new creature'. Our relationships change. Even how and when we worship God is different.

Truly *'...strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leads unto life, and few there be that find it' (Matthew 7:14)*. Yet through all the difficulties that may beset us as Christians in our walk with Him, God's way is *joyous*. We have the hope of life beyond the grave. We have free access to the care of a loving all-powerful Father. We benefit from the prayers and direct intervention of Jesus on our behalf.

We are living in troubled times, and many of us are in straitened circumstances. Time to recall that *'...the eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms' (Deuteronomy 33:27)*. Writes the apostle Paul: *'...The Spirit also helps our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. And he that searches the hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because he makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God. And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose' (Romans 8:26-28)*.

As the Festival of Pentecost approaches, Paul's words are worthy of special attention. God's Spirit in us is active, willing, able in every circumstance.

James

When is 'sunset'?

That's a question asked every week by many brethren. For some the question is, *Is it 8 0'clock* or perhaps 8.02 or 8.06? Preciseness is important for some.

For most of us, sunset is believed to be when the sun finally dips to or below the horizon—darkness. In northern climates the sun sets slowly before darkness falls. We call it *dusk*. And the common perception is *that* is, for example, the beginning of the weekly Sabbath. In Palestine, however, the sun's setting is much faster—dark almost suddenly around 6pm to 7pm year round.

But does the disappearance of the sun—darkness—there or here, mark 'sunset'? In fact it is a misunderstanding.

In the Bible sunset, better *sundown*, has a different meaning. And it throws light on passages of the Scriptures.

In the Dark

Take Mark 1: 32. Were the populace out after dark in unlit streets to meet Jesus? Seems unlikely. Similarly, in Luke 4:40. Compare references to 'evening' (Gk *opsios*). Even in a 'desert place' the disciples were going to send away the crowd to the surrounding villages for food: '... *That evening the disciples came to Jesus and said, "This place is like a desert, and it is already late. Let the crowds leave, so they can go to the villages and buy some food."* (Matthew 14:15). In the dark?—unlikely. And: '...*at even the quails came up, and covered the camp*' (Exodus 16:12). Did they fly in after dark?

Sunset is the Greek *duno*, which means to sink or dive, to shake, to move. It marks those few hours when the sun visibly declines from its highest visible point towards the horizon—after midday, and for the next five or six hours [in the Middle East].

[The meaning of the Hebrew word for 'evening' is much disputed. It *can* be understood as 'between the evenings', a term rejected by the King James translators. It is generally understood to mean mid-afternoon.]

The 'evening' sacrifice in the Temple was at the 'ninth hour' - our 3pm to 4pm. So, observant Jews in those days 'closed shop' early on Friday afternoon to prepare for Sabbath and for the Passover. Nehemiah, for example, shut the gates into Jerusalem as the shadows lengthened '... *began to be dark*' (ch 13:19).

Sabbath Rest

Back to that opening paragraph. This approach to Sabbath observance can be burdensome, turning what God calls a 'delight' (Isaiah 58:13) into a chore. It was an error of the Rabbis, in their zeal to protect the Sabbath, to make Sabbath observance legalistic, introducing for example, the 'sabbath day's journey' rule (two thousand paces)—*never* a part of the Law of Moses. They also opposed healing on the Sabbath, and rebuked Jesus and the disciples for their behaviour on Sabbath (Luke 6:1).

The Sabbath is much more than a physical day of rest—it was implemented *before* Adam did a day's work! Sabbath is for our spiritual refreshment, it ensures in our busy lives our regular encounter with our Creator: '... *turn away your foot from the sabbath, from doing your pleasure on my holy day; and call the sabbath a delight, the holy of the LORD, honourable; and shall honour him, not doing your own ways, nor finding your own pleasure, nor speaking your own words*'.

Each Christian, in the light of the Scriptures, is to personally determine how we each can indeed honour God on His holy days. Our attitude to an approaching Sabbath is one of joyful anticipation and not one of legalistic time-setting. Ω

Three articles of interest for you:

Delight in the Sabbath Why Do You Observe Sunday? Fellowship on the Sabbath

*downloadable on line from www.cgom.org,
or free hard copy from any of our addresses*

*Should you have questions arising we will be
pleased to address your concerns*