

outreach

Tabernacles, in difficult times

The New Horizons Newsletter

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Matthew 28:19-20

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This year again, whether or not the imposed restrictions are appropriate, *The Feast of Tabernacles* will be observed around the world in a ‘time of distress’. Thankfully a ‘distress’ not to be compared with that experienced by our New Testament brethren (II Corinthians 7:26). But it may require some adjustment to our usual practice.

Most Christian churches have—largely on the basis of Romans 13:1—followed their Government’s restrictions, but some have determined to ‘carry on regardless’ with communal services. Indeed some pastors have been fined substantial sums and even jailed for resistance.

The internet has proven to be a safety net for many local assemblies, and services have continued *via* Zoom, Skype and Teams—limited only by incomplete expertise (me!) and, for some, lack of access.

The larger church-wide convocations—such as the Bible festivals especially *Tabernacles*—are more of a challenge to arrange on line, but some *Church of God* denominations are preparing this for *Tabernacles*, in anticipation of another imminent lock-down in some areas or countries. [Check with your

leadership/pastor. Most church groups willingly provide non-members with the code needed to access their on-line services.]

Tradition

Some modern *Churches of God* have observed the festivals almost as ‘necessary for salvation’. In a sense this is so, for their observance (in some form) is an expression of our devotion to our Creator, just as is the weekly seventh-day Sabbath observance. It is, however, tradition—however well meant. (Observant Jews diligently keep the holy days—but continue to reject their Messiah, their Saviour.)

No, our salvation, our adoption into the Family of God, is by grace through faith, and solely by the unimpeachable merits of Jesus Christ, by his blood shed for us.

What matters is our changed heart—lacking in the ancient Israelites, so for them through Isaiah God says: ‘...*your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates: they are a trouble unto me; I am weary to bear them.*’ (ch :14).

Let’s take part if at all possible, in spirit if not in person!

Many brethren for a number of reasons don’t yet have access to the internet, and your church leadership will surely make arrangements to include you in the festival services—perhaps by phone.

In our increasingly uncertain times we would urge all the brethren to acquire this useful tool. On-line Bibles and study tools are freely available. (Instruction in use of the internet is often available at local libraries or schools.)

The Source of our Values

For Christians there can be no other foundation on which to form the principles on which we base our life than the Christian scriptures. As pens the Psalmist: ‘...*Blessed is the man that walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law does he meditate day and night*’ (Psalm 1,2). The Scriptures are a reflection of the mind of God for our good and encapsulated in human language, and they provide the values appropriate for His Family. God’s law resets the pattern for life; man’s law follows the spirit of the times—law follows the decline in general morality.

God’s instruction, His guidance, His *torah* sheds light on the dark path we daily tread. King Solomon writes: *...forget not my law; but let your heart keep my commandments: For length of days, and long life, and peace, shall they add to you*’ (Proverbs 3:1,2). So, too, God’s guidance.

By contrast our world is increasingly influenced by the contrary philosophy now promoted by Pope Francis worldwide and absorbed by most governments. It rejects God’s guidance and embraces ancient pre-Christian humanism. It negates God’s design for separate nations (Deuteronomy 32:8), and promotes a united world of disparate and conflicting philosophies, ideologies, faiths (Amos 3:3).

It is reminiscent of an observation by the prophet Isaiah in reference to the decaying nation of Israel: ‘...*Therefore you have forsaken your people the house of Jacob, because they are replenished from the east, and are soothsayers like the Philistines, and they please themselves in the children of strangers*’ (Isiah 2:6).

As in eastern Buddhism we are now encouraged to meditate, but to meditate on our unregenerate inner thoughts and imaginations, until they become reality—and not on the word of God and its application to our lives. As Jeremiah later adds: ‘...*And they said, There is no hope: but we will walk after our own devices, and we will every one do the imagination of his evil heart*’ (ch 18:12).

In Noah’s time, ‘...*God saw every imagination of the thoughts of [the human] heart was only evil continually*’ (Genesis 6:5). Jesus foretold the same for the end times. We must be constantly aware of these influences—and resist them. Ω

The New Education

Many parents have received the brush-off when they ask, *What did you do today at school?* So, do you know what your child is being taught? Or, do you just trust the school to do the ‘right’ thing? Can you be sure that they are taught values akin to your own? Is there a reason for an increasing number of parents choosing to home-school their children?

It used to be English, Maths, Art, Gym, Geography, Religion. Now—in Primary! - it’s globalism, transgender, LGBTQ+, with a nod towards traditional subjects but each heavily loaded towards ‘climate change’, the ‘common good’. And they still can’t find India on a map—nor London

Religion?—well forget Christianity. Now it’s ‘Chrislam’, Now you chant pagan mantras and take part in alien ritual. Now you learn witchcraft is just another religious expression, and acceptable. Now all cultures have equal value. And don’t pray—certainly not to the God who delivered ancient Israel from slavery. Bible standards on sexuality? Forget it—anything goes now.

Home schooling clearly will be a barrier to such malign influences, as you can inculcate your own values—but it can disadvantage children in isolating them from their peer culture. Is there an alternative pathway for us to tread?

Ancient Israel, wisely, was taught to educate their offspring: ‘... *you shall teach them [the divine principles*] diligently unto your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise up*’ (Deuteronomy 6:7). It’s a comprehensive template for our own twenty-first century lives as followers of Jesus Christ in an increasingly dysfunctional world where our Christian values are widely despised.

Teach our children to be independently-minded, to question, to seek understanding. Teach them to be curious. Teach them there is more than one interpretation of ‘the common good’, that there is indeed ‘truth’. Thus armed with sound life principles they are mentally prepared to challenge the devil-influenced humanist soup increasingly served in our school and university system. Ω

[* *These principles are from God but are the foundation stones on which is built a healthy civil society*]

torah Reconsidered

The *torah*, the first five books of the Christian Bible, is often viewed as a book of Law. At its heart lie the ‘Ten Commandments’, seen as on a par with a modern code of law.

The ‘Ten’, however, are advisory being a summary in words understandable by unregenerate mankind of the great ‘law of love’ implanted in the newly-created man, Adam. After his ignominious defeat by the ‘serpent’ our first parents for the first time experienced ‘good and evil’ leading to mankind’s almost total annihilation some sixteen centuries later (Genesis *ch* 6).

The people of Israel inherited the promises gained by Abraham their forefather, called ‘*a friend of God*’ (James 2:23)—and were chosen to become a model for all mankind (Amos 3:2). They were newly founded as a nation under God, who legislated just penalties for transgressing these principles (Exodus 21 *etc.*, Deuteronomy.) Other nations, as the Indian *Code of Manu*, evolved their own laws—largely a reflection of elements of the ‘law of love’, and from the experience of governing human nature!. Some, however, as under Nimrod, were oppressive, despotic—not unknown in today’s world.

But, as pointed out by the apostle Paul, God didn’t legislate for other nations, and mankind in general simply experienced the consequence of their own sin,

including death (*cp* Romans 1: 18-32): ‘...until the law sin was in the world: but sin is not imputed when there is no law. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses’ (Romans 5:14; *cp* Acts 17:30).

There is, in *torah*, much more than legislation. In fact the term means *instruction*, or *guidance*, and the texts throughout the five books—and indeed all of the Old Testament—present examples of real-life consequences, of acceptance and of disobedience. Thus we have the positive example of Abraham who, ‘...obeyed my voice, and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws’ (Genesis 26:5) - the benefits effective to this day in their descendants. By contrast there is also recorded the adverse effects of failing to follow these precepts.

The message of the Gospel is that the ‘law of love’ is implanted in the Christian through the indwelling Spirit of God. Given our fallen and still often rebellious nature we also need the written law as a guide, a prompt. But as Jesus said in the sermon on the mount, that ‘law of love’ extends from actions to the inner core of our being, to our very thoughts.

Given the hidden depths of our fallen nature, sin remains and often dominates us, for it is only Christ’s imputed and unmerited righteousness that saves us. Ω

Insight from Paul

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

Church is a haven of perfect peace and harmony where all the brethren are Spirit-led and expressing fervent Christian charity towards one another. I doubt, however, that this has been your experience! It certainly isn’t the experience of the apostle Paul, as is witnessed by a recurring theme in his letters to various local assemblies.

Not surprising, really. For all in Christ have been exhumed from a worldly grave to a new life in him—with much of our murky past life still clinging to us. Our prejudices. Our ingrained response to adversity. Our petty rivalries. Our inborn passions and ‘besetting sins’. These don’t fade away except by being actively addressed—with God’s help!

This in-born obsession with our differences is one focus of the apostle, addressed, for example, in his first letter to Corinth (*ch* 6). In Christ we are all one—different races (though ‘*of one blood*’: Acts 17:26), different cultures, different personal back stories, different personalities. So, tensions are almost inevitable and in Corinth they had escalated into lawsuits, with brother (or sister) taking brother to court instead of seeking resolution person to person or with wise counsel from other brethren.

Paul expressed his disappointment that they couldn’t resolve this conflict, adding: ‘...*why do you not rather*

take wrong? why do you not rather suffer yourselves to be defrauded?’ (v.7). Some human interactions are simply not worth bearing a resentful grudge. In one situation where two women were in dispute he urges: ‘... *I beseech Euodias, and beseech Syntyche, that they be of the same mind in the Lord*’ (Philippians 4:2).

Recall Peter’s words about Jesus: ‘...*who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judges righteously*’ (I Peter 2:23). Jesus put it this way, as always providing the perfect solution: ‘...*if your brother shall trespass against you go and tell him his fault between you and him alone: if he shall hear you, you have gained your brother*’ (Matthew 18:15).

He also tells his hearers: ‘...*For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you*’ (*ch* 6:14). It is echoed by the apostle: ‘...*Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord: Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled*’ (Hebrews 12:14-15).

Not just a solution but also a dire warning about the danger of harbouring grudges. Didn’t Jesus also say: ‘...*if you forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses*’ (Matthew 6:15). Heed these warnings and follow their guidance to help enhance harmony in the assembly. Ω

'...What Shall I Do?'

That despairing question resounded around a first century Jerusalem street as the apostle Peter addressed the crowds disturbed by the supernatural events they had just witnessed. Most had experienced the eerie darkness that had enveloped the city just six weeks previously, had perhaps encountered one of those who had risen from their grave or seen the vast curtain in the temple ripped apart. Or perhaps had witnessed the crucifixion of that 'criminal', Jesus.

Now here was Peter explaining that he is their Messiah (Acts 2:36)—whom '*...you have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain: Whom God has raised up*' (ch 2:23f). What a shocker. Convinced by these facts they sought an answer: '*...what shall we do?*' (v.37). It's a question posed time and again during the two millennia since that address by Peter. And it lies at the heart of the Gospel.

Whatever your background—religious, cultural, humanist, atheist, pagan—to attain salvation we each must come to the point where we find it necessary to ask that question, and faced with the inevitability of judgment to come there can be none more vital. We need an answer—and Peter provides it: '*...Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit*' (v.38).

Remember that Peter's hearers were observant Jews whose lives revolved around obedience to God. Yet they still needed to turn their lives around, to '*repent*'. Their wrong-doing ('sin') must have a judicial pardon and the penalty—in this case, *death* (Romans 6:23)—paid for. The Jews, steeped as they were in the law of Moses, well understood *sin* as a breach of law (cp I John 3:4). And all have sinned.

However, as the apostle writes: '*...it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment*' (Hebrews 9:27). That's what we *all* face—to stand before the heavenly court to give account to God (Romans 14:12). And the sentence is capital, *death*. Unless—unless in this life that debt has been paid.

Clearly, the debt can be paid only if someone not under the penalty—*ie* sinless—is willing to die in your place, willing to pay the price. But you won't find such a one, and, anyway, his death would atone for but one other, for you. To save more sinners requires someone who is worth more than all. *Someone divine*. Only in Christianity is such a scenario—a divine Saviour—presented as the one way to salvation, for us to become a part of the family of God, His true children (Acts 4:12).

To be saved, then, that Saviour must be embraced, our lives committed to him, our lives transformed by God's Spirit. Jesus Christ is the answer to our question—the *only* answer. As spoke Joshua to Israel: '*...choose you this day whom you will serve*'. Will it be God (*ie* life), or the world (*ie* death) Ω

The Great Day of Judgment

We are born. We live. We die. *Then what?* Each faith has its own answer—but most agree on one aspect: we *will all face 'judgment'*. The Christian scriptures put it like this: '*...it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment*' (Hebrews 9:27). *There's no escape!*

Judgment is a process. You are alleged to have broken a law, you are arraigned to appear before judge and jury, and you are subject to cross-examination before the jury assesses the evidence. In heaven's court the jury is superfluous, for the Judge already knows.

For those 'in Christ' judgment is on-going in this life: '*...the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God: and*' (I Peter 4:17) - how we react to life's challenges or to persecution, for example. Our on-going assessment determines our role in the Kingdom—not whether or not we will be there, for our sin is covered by Christ's shed blood.

The Great Day

But as Peter notes: '*...if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God?*' . The apostle Paul addresses this in writing to the Thessalonian brethren: '*... In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power*' (II Thessalonians 1 :8-9). John, in Revelation, describes this.

As the end times draw to a close God will permit awesome natural and political chaos to engulf mankind as the inevitable consequence of our increasing sinfulness. Many, however, will in rebellion to Him, continue to '*worship the beast*', (Revelation 14:6ff). Despite the clear warnings they '*...repented not*' (ch 16:8-11) and will experience the judgment of immediate destruction '*...in the presence of the Lamb*' (ch 14:10).

The 'day of judgment' continues throughout the thousand year benign reign of Jesus as the survivors of the terrible end-times destruction live on into that new world'. It's a time when '*...he [Jesus] shall judge among many people, and rebuke strong nations afar off*' (Micah 4:3). When the thousand years ends mankind will once again be tested as to their loyalty to God as the Devil is again unleashed and again deceives many (Revelation 20:7-10).

The Last Day

That 'great day' of judgment then extends to the 'general resurrection' when '*the rest of the dead*' are raised to face their time of judgment (vv.11-15). All of mankind, all who have lived since Adam who have died outside a filial relationship with the Father—all will at that time be restored to physical life for a time of testing. It's a time pictured by the '*last day, the great day*'—the 7th—of the Biblical feast of *Tabernacles* (John 7:37), the era (of unstated length) when the dead will rise from their graves and their lives examined by the standard of 'the books', the Christian scriptures. They then receive their sentence. Judgment Day will be complete. Ω

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