

Spiritual Blessings



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Biblical Basics

The Bible: Section by Section

Part 1 - Overview of Bible Sections

by David Tavender

Often, when delivering a sermon, the speaker will refer the listener to a verse from such-and-such book of the Bible. Because of time constraints, he may not stop to discuss at length the full context of the verse quoted, such as what is happening in the surrounding paragraphs, or when the book was written, under what circumstances, who the original readers would have been, etc. This is understandable, but it does present a situation in which important features of that verse may be missed if one is not aware of the context in which the verse was written.

One example of this is Isaiah 40:31 "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles". This verse has provided great encouragement to many Christians, but most people are not aware of the original setting of this famous verse. Just to get you thinking, consider that the same chapter speaks about Jerusalem (v.2,9), Zion (v.9), Jacob - a title of Israel (v.27), and graven images - a problem for the people at that time (v.19). The next chapter, a continuation of chapter 40, also centres around God's message to

Israel (41:8,14,16,20). Further to this, the book starts by telling us that it is a vision "concerning Judah and Jerusalem" (1:1). All of this must have a bearing on how the verse was to be understood by those who first read it, and consequently, how we read it too. Surely if we ignore the place that Israel and Judah play in the book of Isaiah, we will misinterpret what is being said in Isaiah 40 about being mounted up with wings as eagles, regardless of what spiritual application we might want to make it mean about ourselves.

Context

This series of articles is really about one thing ... context. After all, every word in the Bible is part of a verse. Every verse is part of a paragraph. Every paragraph is part of a chapter. Every chapter is part of a Bible book. And every Bible book fits somewhere into God's plans for mankind. It is my conviction that many poor interpretations of Scripture passages have come about chiefly because of a failure to consider the setting of the passage. When we come across a verse we should try to have some understanding of what the book it came from is about, what sort of book it is, who it was written for, and the place that book plays in the Bible, and in God's plans. It is a fundamental aspect of approaching the Bible which, I believe, even many experienced Christians fail to do.



A Modern Day Example

If we pick up a newspaper and read that, "people were dancing in the streets", we may misunderstand the significance unless we know who these particular people were, and why they wanted to dance. For instance, were these people happy and celebrating something? In some cultures, dancing is a form of mourning the death of a loved one. Perhaps it was a dance contest where the contestants were under a lot of pressure and not happy at all! We could waste a lot of space here speculating upon all the possibilities and still be wrong because we haven't looked at the whole picture. Unfortunately, many people are content to approach the Bible in a similarly speculative way involving a lot of guesswork. If we were really interested about those dancers, we would go to the trouble of finding

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The Bible: Section by Section

out who those people were and why they were dancing. We would want to know the setting behind the sentence "people were dancing in the streets".

I encourage everyone reading this to do the same when reading the Bible. Ask yourself, "What is the setting of what I'm reading?". We don't read a newspaper or any other book one sentence at a time and put our own interpretation on what it means - why should we do this with the Bible? True, the Bible is like no other book in a lot of ways, but that does not alter the fact that each Bible verse has a context or a setting which should be considered before we automatically assume we know what it's talking about.

The Place of Israel

Have you ever really thought about just how big a part Israel plays in the Scriptures? Statistics aren't everything, but consider the following. In the first 11 chapters of the Old Testament we read about some important world-changing historical events: the creation of the heavens and earth, the introduction of sin, the great flood and the scattering of mankind across the earth and the division of language (Genesis 1-11). The rest of the History section of the Old Testament concentrates solely on the one family which became the nation of Israel, and we are given over 420 chapters of events about them alone! Compare this to just 11 chapters about what most of us would call "major" events.

Put another way, overall there are 1189 chapters in the Bible, and of these, about 1100 chapters were written while God was dealing with Israel as His special nation. Surely this tells us something about the important place that Israel plays in the Bible. When we ignore or downplay God's dealings with Israel

in the Scriptures, we are saying that we know better than God about what is important. He has seen fit to spend a lot of time explaining His relationship with that nation, and it must help our understanding of Bible passages to recognise that special and significant role Israel plays in the pages of Scripture.

Does this mean that we should only take notice of those parts of the Bible that have nothing to do with Israel? No, for we are told that, "All Scripture is given by Inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works". (2 Timothy 3: 16, 17). Let us note that while all Scripture is FOR us, not all Scripture is ABOUT us. Making this distinction will help us avoid applying promises or commands to ourselves which may have been intended for Israel or someone other than ourselves.

I do hope you enjoy this series and that it is of some assistance with your reading of God's marvellous Word. Next time we will consider the Old Testament History books as a whole.

At a glance ...

In this series, we will consider the Bible section by section. Each of the following sections will be expanded upon in future issues of Spiritual Blessings.

The History books of the Old Testament describe many events, including the creation, man's original sin, the choosing of Abram from among the scattered human race, and the history of his descendants - Israel. The History books of the OT are: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther.

The Poetry books of the Old Testament are comprised largely of speeches, songs or sayings, and were written during the times covered by the History books of the Old Testament. As such, the poetry often reflects whatever was happening at a particular point in Israel's history, depending on when it was written. The Poetry books of the OT are: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon.

The Prophecy books of the Old Testament record many of the words of God spoken through prophets. These are not always predictions about future events, but are mostly messages that God wanted His people (and some of the surrounding nations) to know at particular times. These books were written mainly during the time of the kings of Israel and Judah, covered by the History books of 1 & 2 Kings, and 2 Chronicles. However, a few were written during the nation's exile into captivity, and their return to their land, covered by the History books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther. The Prophecy books of the OT are: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi.

The History books of the New Testament cover the life, death and resurrection of Christ, with the exception of Acts, which details the acts of the apostles after this time. The History books of the NT are: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts.

The Letters written before Acts 28 are New Testament letters written during the period covered by the book of Acts, and addressed to churches and individuals who were living during the time that Israel was still the dominant nation in God's plans for mankind. The Acts Period Epistles are: Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, Hebrews, James,

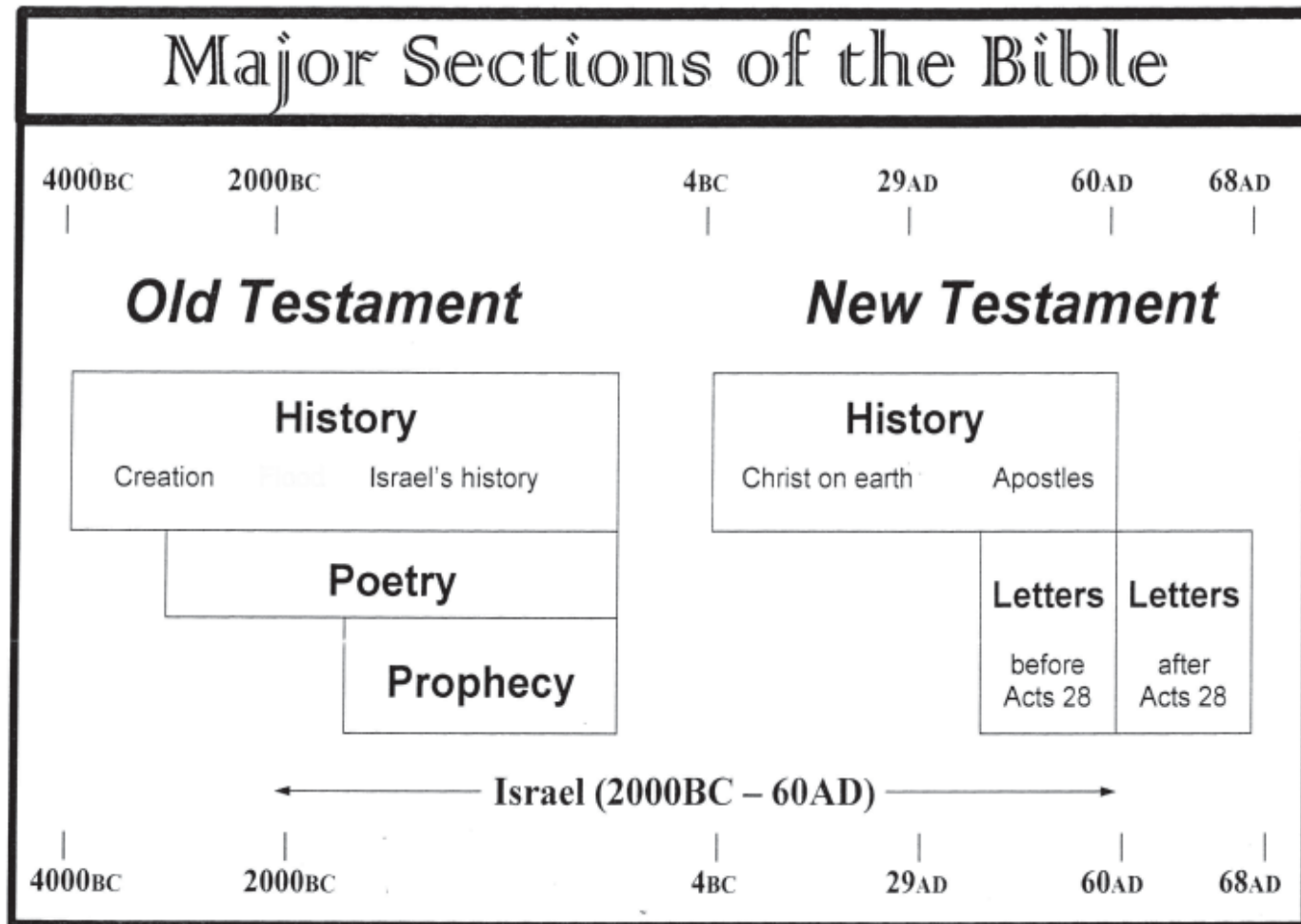
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1 & 2 Peter, 1, 2 & 3 John, Jude, Revelation. (Revelation, though somewhat different in format to the other epistles, is also a letter which, like the others, reflects the conditions of the time in which it

was written).

The Letters written after Acts 28 are New Testament letters written after the period covered by the book of Acts, and addressed to churches and individuals who were living after

Israel ceased to be the dominant nation in God's plans for mankind. The Post-Acts Epistles are: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon.



Every Bible book is either (1) history, or (2) a letter or poetic/prophetic writing that reflects the conditions of the time during which it was written.

Editorial

We are still a bit behind with our issues of Spiritual Blessings this year, but we're catching up, and I hope that by the next one, we will be pretty much on time. The reactions from quite a few to the last issue have been very positive, with more comments than usual. It seems that there is quite a felt need among our readers for basic and systematic teaching in all areas of Bible study, and we will do our best to meet the need. We are all very well served with the other dispensational magazines that

arrive from different parts of the world. We really have no excuse for not knowing and understanding God's revelation, and not only must we do our best to understand it, but also to make it part of our lives, so that the Master can use us when and where He will.

There was one e-mail from overseas following the last issue, that queried a statement I made in the editorial. This came from Duncan McGregor, editor of the magazine called "Search", published by the Open Bible Trust of the UK. A

number of important points have been brought out, which I think will be of benefit to our readers. You will find Duncan's letter and my reply on Page 11 in this issue. If any reader wishes to join the debate, please do so, but be brief.

As I write this, it is mid-May, and we have just had a one day mini-

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By
Athol Walter

Prophecy in a Parable *Matt 22*

It is not overstating the case to say that the Acts of the Apostles is the crucial area as far as understanding the New Testament is concerned. Acts has proved to be a crossroads, and if we take the wrong turn here, we will be wrong all the way through. Conversely, a correct understanding of Acts will necessarily put everything else in the New Testament into its right place, including the Gospels. The important issue that arises out of all this, is the question concerning the beginning of the “Church”.

We should first take note of the main interpretations about the start of the church that exist amongst believers. The most traditional view is that Acts tells of the establishment of Christ’s Church on the Day of Pentecost, recorded in Acts 2. Israel had rejected and crucified their Messiah, and as a consequence, God rejected Israel, and the Christian Church was commenced. Acts is the record of the early days of this Church. A corollary of this view is that the ‘Church’ has taken Israel’s place, or in other words is ‘spiritual Israel’. This is termed the Acts 2 position.

Another view is that Israel was not rejected after the Cross, but given a second chance. The coming of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2 was to empower the apostles to make the second offer of the Kingdom to Israel, the signs and wonders confirming their witness. But by the time we get to the end of Acts,

it was evident that Israel would still not accept Jesus of Nazareth as their Messiah, so it then became apparent that what God was really doing throughout Acts was to start building the church. This view sees Acts as a transition from Kingdom to Church.

Still another interpretation also sees Acts as the second offer of the Kingdom to Israel. However, the people of Israel rejected this second offer. The climax of this rejection is the murder of Stephen. It was at that stage that Saul – later to become Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles – first appears on Scripture’s page. This interpretation says that it was with the conversion of Paul that the Church, the Body of Christ, was commenced, and that from that point on, Gentile believers became members of the Body of Christ, not part of Israel. This is called the Mid-Acts position. A variation of this interpretation is that the Body of Christ started in Acts 13, when Paul first turned to Gentiles after being thrown out of the synagogue.

The final view is that the Church which is His Body, to use the correct term, did not begin until after the people of Israel were set aside by God through Paul at the end of the Book of Acts. This is recorded in the last half of Acts 28. Once this point was reached, Acts stops rather abruptly. This abrupt ending worried me in the past, until I understood the purpose of the book of Acts. This interpretation is called the Acts 28 position, and is the position of this magazine.

The theme of Acts is the second offer of the Kingdom to Israel, and the purpose of Acts is to show why God’s chosen people were rejected by Him and lost, temporarily, their position of privilege. I know that the last sentence is a bald

statement, and it is one of the main purposes of this ministry to show the Scriptural foundations of it. It is obvious that the doctrinal structure held by believers will differ greatly, depending on which of the above positions is believed to be the true one. It should also be obvious that the outcomes from each position are not only very different, but far-reaching.

We believe there are many supporting Scripture passages for our view of Acts, but the one I wish to focus on now is the parable of the Marriage of the King’s Son that we find in Matthew 22:1-14. It would help to read the previous chapter as well, where it is obvious that the subject is the Kingdom of Heaven (or God) and the very real possibility that the Chosen People were about to lose it if they did not change their rebellious attitude. It is in that context that the Lord told them (the Pharisees) another parable and said, “The Kingdom of Heaven is like unto a certain king, which made a marriage for his son.” I hope you can see that God is the king and the Lord is the son.

Notice in v. 3, that the servants were sent to call “those that were bidden” to the wedding. This sounds a little strange to western ears, but it apparently was quite common in eastern societies for people to get an early intimation about a wedding, and later receive the notice of time and place. We don’t have to think too deeply to understand that the people of Israel were “those who were bidden” and that the prior bidding had been through the inspired writers of the Old Testament, promising the future glorious Kingdom of God for Israel.

So, the people knew the “wedding” was coming, and there is much historical evidence, as well as the Gospel records themselves, to show that when John the Baptist

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appeared, followed by the Lord Himself, the expectation of the coming of the Messiah was widespread amongst the Jews. So what corresponds in fact to the invitation of v. 3? Nothing less than the ministry of John the Baptist followed by the Lord and his disciples, as recorded in the Gospels. What was the result? We know full well that the last words of v. 3 are tragically true, "and they would not come." Remember, the Lord had just told them in the previous parable that the leaseholders of the vineyard had slain, not only the servants who had been sent, but also the owner's son. (21:38, 39). At this point in our parable, we have arrived at the crucifixion.

V.4 goes on, however, to tell us that the king sent forth other servants – to the same people who had been previously "bidden" – and this time we have not only the invitation to the wedding, but an added statement. "Tell them which are bidden, I have prepared my dinner: my oxen and my fatlings are killed, and ALL THINGS ARE READY: come unto the marriage." Let's pause here for a moment.

In the proclamation of the Kingdom to Israel during the Gospel years, there was no mention of the Cross. Indeed, when, towards the end, the Lord started to prepare the disciples for His coming death, Peter was not only shocked, but he tried to dissuade the Lord from such a course. It is obvious that the servants sent with the first invitation in the parable, could not have said that all things were then ready for the feast. But those with the second invitation could, and did.

Need I ask who these second invitation servants were? Obviously, they were the apostles filled with "power from on high", who went back to the very same people

to whom the first invitation had been given, and said in effect, "Come to the wedding, the oxen etc. have been slain, and all things are now ready." There was only one thing needed now for the glorious programme of the arrival of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth to get into full swing. That was the positive response of the "bidden guests" to the invitation to come to the wedding.

Look at Peter's words to the Sanhedrin in Acts 3:19,20, "Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord; AND HE SHALL SEND JESUS CHRIST which was before preached unto you: whom the heavens must receive until the TIMES OF RESTITUTION OF ALL THINGS, WHICH GOD HATH SPOKEN BY THE MOUTH OF ALL HIS HOLY PROPHETS SINCE THE WORLD BEGAN."

The passage of time is difficult to track in the book of Acts, but it was less than three months after the Crucifixion when Peter stood before the Sanhedrin, the very same Council of Israel that had crucified Jesus of Nazareth, and told them that though they had killed their Messiah, if they would but repent and accept God's invitation, God would send the Lord Jesus back to them, and the times of refreshing and restitution would begin. Please note, every bit of what Peter said is in the Law and the prophets, and none of this has anything to do with the Church of which we are a part.

Now why did God give them this second invitation? Why did He not put His people Israel aside at that point? Because the Lord prayed, as He was being nailed to the Cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." In spite of the traditional view and the

teaching of a number of hymns, the Lord was not praying for sinners generally, but specifically for that generation of Israel who knew not the hour of their visitation, and who had cried out before Pilate, "We have no king but Caesar". Christ's prayer was answered, and the book of Acts, which is the historical record of the second invitation of the parable of Matt. 22, is the answer to that prayer.

Again, we must ask what the result of this second invitation was. V.5 tells us. "But they made light of it, and went their ways, one to his farm, another to his merchandise: and the remnant took his servants and entreated them spitefully, and slew them." What a marvellously succinct and inspired commentary on what happened during the years of the book of Acts! And how tragic! The Jewish authorities killed Stephen and James to start with. Saul accounted for quite a few more unnamed heroes of the Faith. Don't miss the severity of the persecution handed out to the believers during Acts by the Jews. There were very few instances where Gentiles persecuted them, but Israel did. The Lord had warned His disciples before His death, that as the world had hated Him, it would also hate them.

Now, please give careful consideration to this next point. What was the king's reaction to the rejection of this second invitation in the parable? V. 7 has the answer for us, and I can never read this verse without marvelling at how exactly these words were fulfilled. "But when the king heard thereof, he was wroth: and he sent forth his armies and destroyed those murderers, and burned up their city." There are two other

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references that I want you to consider as you think about this verse.

Firstly, Matt. 21:40, 42. After the Lord told His listeners about the wicked husbandmen killing the owner's son, He asked them, "When the lord therefore of the vineyard cometh, what will he do unto those husbandmen? They said unto Him, He will miserably destroy those wicked men, and will let out his vineyard unto other husbandmen, which shall render him the fruits in their season." Just in case anyone misses the obvious, they pronounced their own doom.

Now look at Matt. 23, a chapter full of woes. I hope you read the whole chapter, but I will quote only vv. 37 and 38 where the Lord said: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! BEHOLD, YOUR HOUSE IS LEFT UNTO YOU DESOLATE."

After all that has been brought forward in this study, when I now ask why God did not destroy those wicked murderers and burn up their city immediately after the crucifixion, but waited another forty years before He did it, you will be able to answer straightaway. But note this significant fact. The Romans destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem in AD 70, and there has never been a Temple in Jerusalem since that time right down to this very day. No Temple services, no sacrifices, no priests, and the Jewish people persecuted and scattered throughout the nations of the world, yet still a separate and identifiable people. And it is inter-

esting, to say the least, that in the lifetime of many of us – in mine, certainly – there is once more a nation of Israel in existence, and rumours abound about the rebuilding of the Temple. But it is not there yet.

This is quite a long study, so I will very briefly summarize the last verses of the parable. In vv. 8 and 9, the king sends servants out into the highways and the byways to bring in guests for the wedding to replace the original invitees who had counted themselves unworthy. Some teach that this refers to the preaching of the Christian Gospel since the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, and is largely centred on John's Gospel. I have a problem with that view, because Paul claims that nothing had been said either in prophecy, type or plain teaching, about what God would do if and when Israel defected. Because of that, I can't accept that anything in the parable refers to this present dispensation. I believe the last invitation in the parable refers to the time after the close of this present dispensation, when God takes up His purposes for and with Israel again, and Jewish believers will go out into the nations to conduct a missionary campaign the likes of which the world has never seen.

Lastly, what about the man at the wedding feast who was not wearing the specially provided garment? I'll leave that for you to work out for yourself. Goodness me, do you want me to do everything for you?

To be continued

Editorial

cont from pg 3

conference in Sydney. At least seven regulars were unable to be present for various reasons, but seventeen like-minded folk gathered around the Word. As usual, the fellowship was warm and the studies rich and challenging. I am very appreciative of the willingness of the speakers to participate, and as many brought extra food, we ate very well. The committee plan to have more of these day conferences in different locations throughout the year.

You will notice a book review in this issue. I would be happy to receive reviews (about 500 words) of any books you have read recently that have helped or inspired you. They need not necessarily be along Acts 28 lines, although that is desirable, but they certainly must be books supporting the full inspiration of the Bible and the Deity of the Lord Jesus Christ. We retain the right to publish or not publish as we see fit. Contributions can be sent to me directly at 610 Limeburners Creek Rd, Clarence Town, NSW, Australia, 2321, or by email aewalter@bigpond.com

Please pray for us as we try to make all see just what is the Dispensation of the Mystery, and we, in our turn, pray that you will continually be aware of the Lord's presence, that we all will be faithful in our walk, and clear in our witness.

Yours in our Lord and Head,
Athol Walter.

By Athol Walter

Is God Just?

It is not uncommon to hear people question the justice or fairness of God, especially after some natural tragedy, such as the Boxing Day tsunami that devastated large areas of Asia. It is ironic, to say the least, that people who give no thought to God in the normal course of their lives, will say such things as, "Well, if God is a God of love, how could He do this or allow that?" I am aware that those sort of questions raise problems, but that is not the theme of this article. Rather, I want to focus on the justice of God in His dealings with mankind and particularly, the sin question.

When we think about God's plan of salvation - "that wonderful redemption, God's remedy for sin" as the hymn-writer, Katherine Hankey, puts it - we naturally dwell on the rich blessings that have overwhelmed us as a result of believing the Gospel of God's love and grace when it was preached to us. I know that, for a long time, it did not occur to me that the plan of salvation did anything for God, and while I must not jump to conclusions about other children of God, I suspect that many others would have to say the same.

It is, however, important that we realize that the Gospel (I use the term in a wide sense to embrace the whole plan of salvation) does several things for God before ever it does anything for us. Let's look at some Scripture.

In the opening verses of his epistle to the Romans, Paul has several things to say about the Gospel that we tend to overlook. In v. 1, he states that he is an apostle separated unto the Gospel of God, that was promised through the prophets of old, a Gospel which concerns His Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Let's stop and take stock of those points. Firstly, the Gospel is OF God. "Of" is one of those little words in

English that are very rubbery, they can mean so many different things. The Amplified Version translates this as "of and from God". I think we can say that the Gospel not only comes from God, but has to do with Him as well.

The next point is that the Gospel "concerns" God's Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. The Gospel is centred in Christ, and notice that we have the two sides of His nature touched on here. According to the flesh, He was the Son of David. According to the divine side, Christ was declared to be the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead. Paul here speaks about the Gospel for four verses and does not say one thing about us. It is not until vv. 5 & 6 that he first states the fact that the believer is called and chosen in Christ.

Now turn over to Romans 3. I want to focus on v. 4, but don't forget that Paul's theme is still the "Gospel", for he is at pains to establish the principle of Justification by Faith. So, in the AV, v. 4 reads: "God forbid: yea, let God be true, but every man a liar; as it is written, That thou mightest be justified in thy sayings, and mightest overcome when thou art judged."

I hope you know that Paul did not write "God forbid". As a Hebrew of the Hebrews, he would not use the word "God" in that way. The literal translation of the Greek is, "May it not be!" The Amplified Version puts the verse like this: "By no means! Let God be found true though every human being be false and a liar, as it is written, That You may be justified and shown to be upright in what You say, and prevail when You are judged [by sinful men]." The words in square brackets are added to give the sense the translators think is intended.

The quote is from Psalm 51:4: "Against thee, thee only, have I

sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest." (AV) The differences in this verse and Paul's quote is largely because he quotes from the Septuagint translation. If you wish to argue about Paul's use of this verse, I would remind you that he was writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

The suggestion that God can be questioned about His actions may come as something of a shock, but there is an important point here. I want to pick out several key statements as we move through ch. 3. "There is none righteous, no, not one." (10) "Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets, Even the righteousness of God, which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference ..." (20 - 22).

Before I comment on these verses, please note that the words "righteous" and its related words, and "just" and its related words, have exactly the same meaning. The family of "righteous" words comes from the Anglo-Saxon language, while the "just" group are from Latin. At the risk of being tedious, I repeat, righteousness and justification are one and the same. The one thing lacking in the "righteous" family is an equivalent of "justify". We cannot say "righteous-ify", we have to say "make righteous". So read the verses above again, and put the one word in each place. For example, "There is none righteous". "No flesh shall be made righteous in His sight". Or,

Is God Just?

“There is none just”. “No flesh shall be justified in His sight.”

Notice that in the above verses, before we ever get to the righteousness which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all etc, we have “But now the righteousness (or justification) of God without the law is manifested ...” It is plainly and gloriously true that Romans 3 states that the believer is justified (or made righteous) by faith and not by works, but it is just as clearly stated that the Gospel justifies God first.

We move down to vv. 23-26. Please read them all, but look particularly at 24, 25 and 26: “... through the redemption which is [provided] in Christ Jesus, Whom God put forward [before the eyes of all] as a mercy seat and propitiation by His blood - the cleansing and life-giving sacrifice of atonement and reconciliation – [to be received] through faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in His divine forbearance He had passed over and ignored former sins without punishment. It was to demonstrate and prove at the present time that He Himself is righteous (or just) and that He justifies and accepts as righteous (or just) him who has faith in Jesus.” (Ampl. Version.)

Here it is once again. The Gospel of Justification by Faith alone, witnessed to by the prophets of old, before it does anything else, shows God to be just or righteous in His actions in providing the way of salvation and in His justification of sinners through faith in Christ.

To restate it in other words, Paul is saying that the redemption provided through the death of Christ not only brings life and forgiveness to the sinner who be-

lieves it, but it also shows that God was, and is, completely just or righteous in what He has done, and is also justified in forgiving the sins of any who believed the Gospel, both those who lived before the Cross and those since. It is so important that not only is justice done, but that it be seen to be done, that in this one area of the provision of justification through faith alone, God allows Himself to be examined. I suspect that Satan has often scrutinised everything that God has done in carrying out His plan of redemption to see if there is even the slightest thing wrong with any part of it. We can rest assured, however, that God’s actions are just, they are based on righteousness and nothing can be called into question.

There is another aspect touched on in these verses that is linked with our subject. Earlier in the chapter, Paul talks about God judging evildoers as well as allowing His own acts to be scrutinised. The argument is rather complicated and I’m not sure I can explain it all properly, but I am sure that Paul is saying that God does not use evil to show up His grace and mercy. Both Paul and others were accused of teaching this, but he utterly repudiates it.

He points out that if God did use unrighteousness in order to demonstrate His righteousness, then He could not, in all justice (note the word!) condemn the unrighteous. The truth of the matter is that God does not, indeed could not, use sin to highlight grace, or do anything else like that. This means, in turn, that He can righteously judge and condemn the sinner who spurns His grace and provision of salvation. And perhaps most importantly of all, it also means that God’s actions in condemning Satan will finally be vindicated and recognized throughout the universe as just.

Isaiah 45:7 may, at first glance, appear to say that God does indeed create evil. It reads:

“I form light

And create darkness.

I make peace

And create evil.”

The Hebrew word translated evil in this verse, is RA, which can mean both moral evil and evil in the sense of a calamity or judgement. With either meaning possible, the context must decide which is meant.

I set the verse out as above in order that the parallel feature of Hebrew poetry would be obvious, and it is this feature which will settle the matter for us. The verse consists of two couplets that echo each other in the way of Hebrew poetry. The first line of each couplet state a similar thought, but in different words. The second line of each couplet contrasts the thought of the first line, both second lines expressing a similar thought to each other, again in different words. This means that ‘light’ is the parallel of ‘peace’, and ‘darkness’ is the parallel of ‘evil’. We have not progressed far, you may think, but consider. Darkness is the opposite of light, and the evil intended is the opposite of peace.

If moral evil was intended by the word evil, then the opposite should be righteousness or goodness. The second couplet, in that case, should read: “I make righteousness, and create evil.” But Isaiah wrote peace, not righteousness. Peace is the result of righteousness, so the evil that is parallel to this is the judgements or calamities that are the result of sin. God is not, and cannot be, the author of evil meaning sin.

So to answer the question which began our article, “Is God Just?”,

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Read Any Good Books Lately?

by Athol Walter

I recently bought and read a book that has been around for quite a number of years, but which I had never read. The first volume was published in 1972, a second volume followed some years later, and in 1999, the two previous parts were put into one book and re-issued. I have found it of so much help and interest that I want to tell you about it.

The book is "The New Evidence That Demands A Verdict" by Josh McDowell. The subtitle on the cover says, "Evidence I & II. Fully updated in one volume to answer questions challenging Christians in the 21st. Century." It is in the field of Christian Apologetics, which does not mean apologizing for our Faith, but making a defence for the Faith.

The book is divided into four parts, and I quote from the author's preface: "Part One deals primarily with the trustworthiness of the Bible; Part Two gives the historical evidence and supporting attestations for Jesus' claims to be God; Part Three addresses primarily two historical challenges to the Christian faith from radical biblical critics (which are used by many to deny the accuracy and reliability of both Old and New Testaments); Part Four is an entirely new section devoted to: (1) evidence for the know-ability of truth; (2) answers to divergent worldviews (such as Buddhism, mysticism etc.); (3) a defense of the existence of miracles; and (4) evidence for the knowability of history." Finally, the Appendix presents four powerful essays regarding criticism of the Bible.

A friend of mine is a relativist, who believes that all truth is relative and there is no such thing as absolute truth. I loved the answer to this position given in the book. I quote: "Most relativists believe that relativism is absolutely true and

that everyone should be a relativist. The relativist stands on the pinnacle of an absolute truth and wants to relativize everything else." I haven't yet had the chance to confront my friend with that one! The author, and the writers he quotes, uses the writings of the opponents of the Bible to demonstrate how false their respective positions really are.

Josh McDowell gives his personal testimony, which I found very moving indeed. The last few pages of the book contain the Four Spiritual Laws and an explanation of the way of Salvation, giving advice to new converts.

An important point made by the author is that evidences for the reliability of the Bible, such as archaeological evidence, do not prove that the Bible is the Word of God. What it does do is to prove the accuracy and reliability of the Bible. We must always remember that the basis of our life in Christ is faith, not apologetics, no matter how good or overwhelming they may be.

There is an extensive Bibliography, and in addition, the book has a section of biographical sketches of selected authors mentioned throughout its pages. I had heard many of these names before, but knew nothing of their backgrounds, and I found it very satisfying to learn these details.

Josh McDowell gives no indication of understanding the dispensational boundary of Acts 28, but as this book is not a commentary or exposition of Scripture, that does not detract from it's value. In its field of Christian Apologetics it contains a great deal to inspire, encourage and confirm any believer about the foundation of our faith, God's Word.

\$26.95 (inc. postage) see Book Agency details on page 12.



Is God Just?

.....cont from Pg. 8

the answer is "Yes, indeed He is." He is just when He justifies the believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, simply because the Lord, the last Adam, paid the price for the sins of the world. And having provided a free and perfect way of escape from the punishment of sin, God is also just when He condemns those who refuse to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Gospel of God concerns God's Son, and first declares the righteousness of God, and only when that has been established beyond any shadow of doubt, does the Gospel move on to become the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes. May the Lord help us to get the order right in our thinking, in our walk for Him, and in our witnessing.

Doctor's Notes:

No man's education is complete if he does not know the Bible. No Christian minister is really qualified for the ministry of the Christian Church without a thorough study of the Bible. No Christian worker can be fully effective without a ready knowledge of the Bible. No Christian believer can live the Christian life to the full without an adequate grasp of the Bible.

Dr. J. Sidlow Baxter. "Explore the Book".

Letter to the Editor

Hello Athol,

Many thanks for another excellent issue of Spiritual Blessings. If I were to make one small criticism of the content, I would take issue with an example of dispensational truth in the editorial. (See Vol 19 No 1). The fact that Christians today are not stoned for 'gathering sticks' on a particular day of the week is not one of the best examples that could be cited to explain dispensational truth. However, and this I think is unfortunate, you are not the only dispensationalist who 'picks' on the fourth commandment as one that needs not to be followed by Christians.

While dispensationalists often believe they can disregard this commandment with impunity, they would not dream of committing murder, adultery or theft. Are we not in danger of being accused of applying 'wrong division' to the Ten Commandments, which were given as a whole packet, if we agree that we should obey the first three, ignore the fourth, and then comply with commandments five to ten?

I say it is "unfortunate" that the fourth commandment is thought to be dispensable, because it is probably the most visibly demonstrative commandment that sets the 'practising' Christian apart from his non-Christian neighbours. The world, at large, will not see us not coveting our neighbour's belongings, or not giving false testimony, nor committing murder, adultery or theft, or having other gods before the Lord, nor making for ourselves graven images. The only other demonstrable way that we will be seen as set apart, is in the absence of taking the Lord's name in vain (but many non-Christians are not given to blaspheming either).

While we know that we are not going to be judged by God for gathering sticks on our adopted day-of-rest, if the Christian in Shetland were to cut his peat on a Sunday afternoon after returning from church in the morning, he would certainly be open to judgement by his neighbour, who could justifiably question the Christian's claim to be 'different' from his non-believing neighbours.

It is not the fact that we know we are not going to be judged for doing the things the world does on a Sunday that should govern our attitude to the fourth commandment, but it should be seen as a clear and visible opportunity to witness to those around us, who see our church-going and know that we are Christians, that we do value the concept and the practicality of a regular day set apart from the rest of the week.

No doubt many dispensationalists do keep Sunday special (while still understanding that there is thereby no obligatory concession to the Law), if only for the physical and spiritual benefits to be had by so doing. But the potential effect on those around us, of such a visible witness, should not be underestimated for, in my experience, the Christian's attitude to Sunday is one of the first things that the non-Christian will question whenever the latter observes what they perceive as 'Sabbath-breaking' in the Christian.

Finally, let me say that I do not regard refraining from non-essential chores on a Sunday to be in any way restrictive of my freedom in Christ. I count it a privilege to serve the Lord in any way and if observing one day of rest in seven can be used by Him to witness to my neighbours then I am delighted not to cut my peat, mow my grass, do my washing,

be frustrated by a computer, etc. on a Sunday. May God be praised for instituting a weekly day of rest which I am happy to 'borrow' from any dispensation!

Regards – Duncan McGregor. UK

The Editor replies:

Thank you, Duncan, for writing and your kind remarks about our magazine. You raise some important points, but I think there are some basic flaws in your logic.

While it is true that we should, as you say, be mindful of the effect our liberty in Christ might have on a 'weaker brother' or an observant unbeliever, what makes the 4th commandment concerning the Sabbath day such a good example of right division, is that the punishment that was commanded by the Lord is no longer in force, and every believer knows it. The important thing is that the punishment is no longer applied **because God has changed the dispensation**, and the rules that applied under Moses do not apply to believers today. It is what God has done that is relevant, not any country's laws, and in my experience of trying to make known the Dispensation of the Mystery, I find that many believers who know nothing of Dispensational Truth and cannot see that there are differences now compared to the Acts period, have no difficulty whatsoever in seeing that the rule about the Sabbath day does not apply to us now. I have found that this helps them to understand what I am trying to say about later dispensational changes, whether they agree or not. It is not about whether we keep all the commandments except the fourth or not. It is about the fact that the 4th commandment is a dramatic, and easily understood, example of the way in which God has, from time to time, changed His way of dealing with His people.

Letter to the Editor

As I read your letter, I want to paraphrase Paul like this, "Duncan, I fear for you, you seem to be observing days etc." (Gal. 4:10, 11). Your logic seems to proceed on the basis that we are still under the Law, i.e. the ten commandments. You say that we keep Nos. 1 to 3 and 5 to 10, and happily throw out No. 4. Not so, Duncan. I am not under the Law, and as a Gentile, I have never been under the Law. It just does not apply to me.

I think that the NT references to believers not being under the Law any more belong to the Acts period epistles, where the Law was still an issue for both Jewish and Gentile believers. But even they had come out from under the Law, because as Paul taught, they died in Christ, and through that death, were free from any obligation to keep the Law. (Rom. 7) But, you seem to say, this could be seen as freeing us to commit murder or steal, or not worship God with all our heart, mind and strength, etc. No, it does not, of course. I do not steal, for example, because Scripture written to me tells me, "Let him that stole, steal no more." (Eph. 4:28). As I am sure you are aware, the practical sections of the mystery epistles set a standard of living that in many respects exceeds that of the commandments. Yet I have a sneaking suspicion that the character of a child of God today, who lives in the spirit of the practical exhortations of our epistles, would be very much like the character of an Israelite who lived, not only according to the letter of the Law, but also in its spirit. But that is not the point of our discussion either.

As said earlier, we should indeed be mindful of the effect of our actions on those around us, and should accept any limitations on our spiritual liberty this may bring in a grateful and submissive

spirit. But how far should we allow this to control us and infringe on those liberties? Certainly, Paul was not having any 'weaker brother' argument in his dispute with Peter that we read of in Gal. 2. He was not going to allow anything or anyone to put either himself or his converts back under the bondage of the Law. But where we draw the line now is a moot point, and each case must be treated on its merits.

You say, Duncan, that you are happy to 'borrow' the day of rest from any dispensation, but you only borrow the part that suits you. I am sure that, even if you did not cut peat on Sunday, after having been to church in the morning, that you still had a lovely hot meal, or at least boiled the kettle for a comforting cuppa. In so doing, of course, you broke the Sabbath that you say you have happily 'borrowed'. As you say, the Law was given as a whole package,

Doctor's Notes:

The versatile ne'er-do-well is often castigated by the taunt, "Jack of all trades and master of none." In reality, however, that saying is a perversion. What the famous Benjamin Franklin actually said was that a man should be "Jack-of-all-trades and master of ONE." A really cultured man has been described as someone who knows something about everything, and everything about something. So far as the Christian worker is concerned, and most of all the Christian minister, the specialisation-point must be the Bible. Other knowledge may be interesting, useful, important; but to be a master in Bible knowledge is vital.

Dr. J. Sidlow Baxter. "Explore the Book".

and by breaking the 4th, you break the lot. Maybe it's just as well the dispensation has changed, and that the Law, with its stonings, is no longer in force! Yours in Christ, Athol Walter.

Meetings

Come along and meet with us! All meetings (except annual conf.) are free. All welcome.

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Redbank Plains High School.

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June Long Weekend
June 11-13, 2005
(07) 3297 1981

Sydney:

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104 Galston Rd
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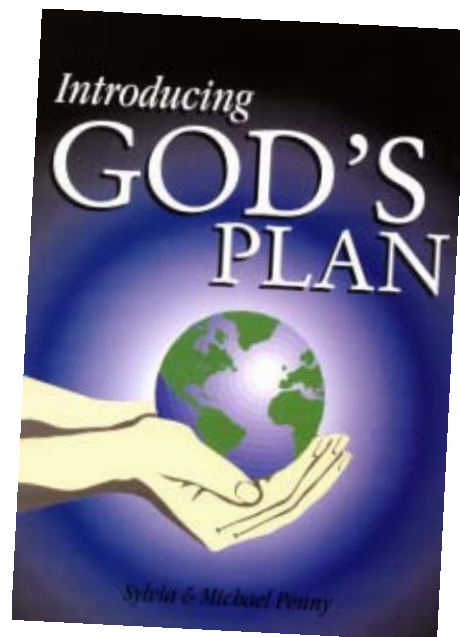
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