

Light

A snow leopard cub is perched on a tree branch, looking directly at the camera. The cub has a thick, spotted coat and is surrounded by snow-covered pine branches. The background is a bright, snowy landscape under a clear blue sky.

...on a New World

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Cover picture: Snow Leopard

Note: All Bible quotations are taken from the New King James Version except where another version is indicated after the text.

‘The Unknown God’

ATHENS was one of the great university cities of the ancient world. It also had more statues to various gods in marble, wood, gold and silver, than any other city. One writer wrote at the time that it was easier to find a god there than a man!

When the Apostle Paul arrived in Athens almost 2,000 years ago, the legacy of its philosophers, poets and sculptors still remained to influence the life and thoughts of its people. The Athenians were ‘religious’ and eager to discuss religion, but there was no spiritual depth in their beliefs. Apollonius, a philosopher contemporary with Paul, even rebuked them for their *‘lascivious jigs’* at the festival of Dionysus and for their love of human slaughter in the gladiatorial games.

If you had been there with Paul you would have been in a social and spiritual atmosphere similar to parts of our modern world. The political ideals of liberty, democracy and national self-sufficiency had lost their appeal in a world dominated by corrupt governments and shaken by economic crises and social unrest. The old gods retained their temples and their sacrifices but had ceased to inspire a living faith. The master minds of the preceding century, Plato and Aristotle, seemed to have no message for the rising generation, no cure for the mood of disillusionment, scepticism and fatalism.

If today you are one of those who believe that civilization with all its conventional values has been debunked, in ancient Athens you would have been a follower of Diogenes the Cynic, whose simple and self-centered life had demonstrated that it’s possible to do without almost all of the things that most people consider essential. Or if you are currently an agnostic, uncertain whether to believe in God or not,

then you would have found yourself at home among the Stoics, the devout company who gathered in the Painted Portico to hear Zeno of Cyprus proclaim his doctrine of submission to an all-wise Providence. Or, if you are a rationalist, ready to welcome the assurance that modern science has finally disposed with all the ‘fairy tales’ that satisfied our grandparents, then you might have been comfortable in the peaceful garden where Epicurus preached his gospel of salvation by common sense.

‘TO THE UNKNOWN GOD’

This then was the city which Paul entered – a city with magnificent art and architecture, an academic centre, but ‘*given over to idols*’. As Pausanias, a later traveller noted, there were also a number of altars with the inscription: ‘*TO THE UNKNOWN GOD*’ [Acts 17. 23]. Paul saw one of them.



*A pagan altar to ‘The Unknown God’
found in Rome*

In Acts chapter 17 we can read about Paul’s visit to the city – it says that his spirit was ‘*provoked*’ [verse 16] by what he saw; the New English Bible translates it ‘*exasperated*’. Paul was angry because of the misdirection and waste of human intelligence and energy. ‘*Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshippers, and in the market-place daily with those who happened to be there*’ [verse 17].

When ‘*certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers*’ [verse 18] first heard Paul speak, they would have tried to fit his thought into one or other of their own similar ideas. When they could not, they called him ‘*this babbler*’, or more literally ‘*this seed-picker*’, one who apparently

followed no settled system of philosophy but picked up grains of thought from others according to his own fancy.



Mars Hill in Athens

In response to the order given by the Areopagites (the city magistrates) to explain his beliefs, Paul stood on the side of Mars Hill and told them that in his opinion they were *'very religious'* [verse 22], referring to their passion for numerous gods and religions. He then told them in detail about what they had called, *'some strange things to our ears'* [verse 20 onwards] – of the creation of the world and all things in it, of true worship, repentance, the new order to come and the resurrection.

EVOLUTION IS NOT TRUE

Paul's reasoning was firmly based on the Biblical revelation of God – the *'God, who made the world and everything in it'* [verse 24]. By beginning his speech with these words he was striking at the foundation of Epicurean philosophy as well as modern evolutionary theory. Because 'all things' are included in God's creation, He is *'Lord of heaven and earth'*. God is firmly in control and being Lord of all

He cannot be confined in a building – He *‘does not dwell in temples made with hands’*. Being the Source of all, He does not need anything that men can give Him and He is not dependent on the service of men’s hands [verse 25]. God says, *‘If I were hungry, I would not tell you; for the world is mine, and all its fullness’* [Psalm 50.12].

Sacrifice is only of value as an act of obedience through which men show their faith. There is no service which men can render to God which has any value in itself as if it supplied His needs or satisfied His desires. The numerous sacrifices offered to their gods by the Greeks were not only given to false gods, but would have been useless if given to the true God. The God Paul revealed to his listeners is not indifferent to men, as their very existence depends on Him at every moment. *‘If he should gather to himself his Spirit and his breath, all flesh would perish together’* [words of Elihu in Job 34.14]. Paul added that *‘he gives to all life, breath, and all things’* [Acts 17.25].

Paul then described how God has always been closely involved in human affairs:

‘And he has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their pre-appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation’
[Acts 17.26].

Paul was referring to the fact that everybody is descended from Adam, as described in Genesis, so there is no room for racial prejudice or national pride. And we all die because of the curse pronounced on Adam when he first sinned.

The concept of divine creation is often rejected these days and replaced by the Epicurean concept of man’s ‘development’, or evolution, from primordial sludge. But Paul is confirming that the history of the nations, their geographical boundaries and their progress and decline, are all in the control of the One who made the universe and all things in it.

If man was created, it is obvious that he was created for a purpose, said Paul, which is *'to dwell on all the face of the earth'*. For the earth was not created to remain empty, it was formed to be inhabited [Isaiah 45.18]. Man was commanded to *'replenish the whole earth'* and to have *'dominion'* over it [Genesis 1.28 AV]. Paul reasoned that God would not just leave that purpose to be achieved by letting the world population grow randomly until it covered all the surface of the globe. Paul told his audience that it was being achieved by divine control of events in human history and the distribution of the various nations around the world. God had *'determined their pre-appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation'* [Acts 17.26].



The Apostle Paul speaking to the Athenians

GOD'S PURPOSE IN CREATION

Paul then continues his speech by explaining God's purpose with his creation in more detail. God always intended that the people filling the earth should *'seek the Lord'* [verse 27]. Paul's conclusion is that of the prophet Isaiah. If the Creator can say, *'I am the LORD, and there is no other'* [Isaiah 45.18], then it follows with logical certainty that in the end, to Him *'every knee shall bow, every tongue shall take an oath'* [Isaiah. 45.23].

Paul also described the tendency of all mankind to *'seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for him and find him'* [Acts 17.27]. This *'groping'* in the dark is the best that could be said for Greek efforts to know the 'Unknown'. It was also a testimony to the fact that there is a God to be found and that it is part of the constitution of man to seek Him.

But it also involves a paradox, because if God is a universal Being and is the very ground of men's own existence, then we are surrounded by God even at the moment that we are searching for Him. This fact prompted Paul to say that *'He is not far from each one of us'* [verse 27]. If *'in him we live and move and have our being'* [verse 28], why did the Athenians think he was 'Unknown'?

At this point in his speech Paul quotes *'certain of their own poets'* – Aratus, from his native Cilicia, and Cleanthes – who had expressed the Stoic view that men are the *'offspring'* of God. But in a characteristic way Paul seizes on the word *'offspring'* and points out that it implies a parent – and parent and offspring are distinct. The same word also implies the facts of conception and birth; the child has his origin out of the parent, but has a separate existence from the parent. The very fact that men have characters and qualities of their own should lead to the conclusion that God must have a character and quality of His own – distinct from theirs, even though theirs is derived from Him.

So it is wrong to think that God can be represented by gold, silver or stone images, which are man-made and the result of *'man's devising'* [verse 29]. Such images reflect the character of their makers, not God's character. Men cannot create something which is God-like and they can only know God through His revelation of Himself in His own written word, the Bible.

ACT NOW!

So Paul was telling them that we have not 'evolved', as some believed then and many believe today. God's creation has a purpose,

which Paul tried to explain. However long man's false concept of God and His worship had existed, 'God *'overlooked'* [verse 30], but he warned them that this period of tolerance had now ended! For Paul continued:

'...now he commands all men everywhere to repent, because he has **appointed a day** on which he will judge the world in righteousness ...' [Acts 17.30,31].

So if creation has a purpose there must come a time when that purpose will be accomplished. Having control over human affairs means that God has a plan in mind, and one day that plan will be complete. So all the previous steps in Paul's argument lead to this conclusion – that the 'determined times' have their climax in an **appointed day**, '*a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by the man whom he has ordained*' [verse 31].

According to the Bible that **man** is Jesus Christ, who came into this world 2,000 years ago, died on the cross and has now risen from the dead. This fact of his resurrection cannot be of concern to him alone. It affects everybody, because it concerns the nature and destiny of humanity. It proves the possibility of life after death and it is a reminder of the time that is coming when Jesus Christ '*will judge (or rule) the world in righteousness*' [verse 31].

By giving an example of God's intervention in the past – the resurrection of Jesus Christ – it supplies a test for the Bible's claim that God had created the world in the beginning. Here is evidence that the whole sequence of man's history did in fact begin with the action of God at the time of creation and for the Athenians the resurrection was the most recent and dramatic example of God's action and control.

It is the assurance that God, the source of everything and the sustainer of all living things, is independent and distinct from man, but has a purpose with the human race and that He is in control of all human history in order to bring it about. It is the assurance that He is

actively working in the world **right now**, having already sent the man – Jesus Christ – ordained as judge into the world 2,000 years ago and having already given absolute proof of that fact by raising him from the dead.

THE COMMAND TO REPENT

Apparently the Athenian academics had given themselves the title ‘the masters of them who know’. So even though they had recognized a limit to their knowledge by setting up altars to ‘**THE UNKNOWN GOD**’, imagine telling them to ‘**repent**’! The Greek for repentance means literally ‘a change of mind’.

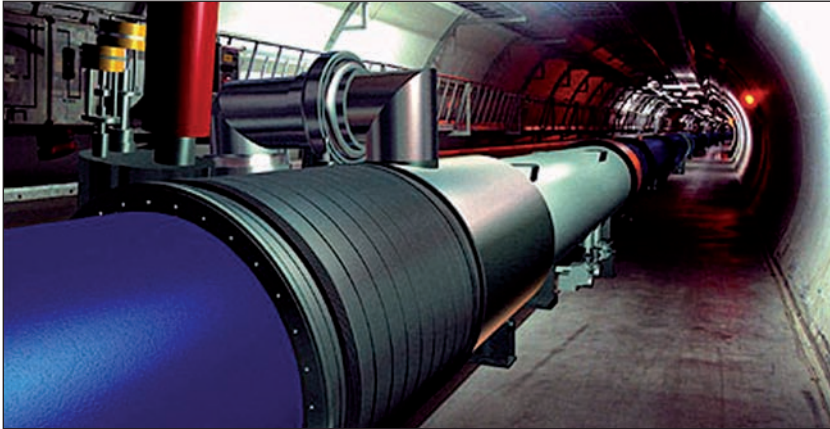
When Paul proclaimed that all this great purpose was to be fulfilled ‘*by the man whom he (God) has ordained*’, it was probably seen as one ‘seed-picker’s’ view. After all, the Athenians had their own masters who guided their life – Plato, Aristotle, Zeno and Epicurus, for example. In a similar way many people today follow a watered-down version of some ‘philosophy’: atheism, agnosticism, evolution, or ‘don’t-care-ism’. Even Diogenes the Cynic has some representatives in the shoddy, ill-mannered people of this age who display a totally self-centered, purposeless and Godless life-style!

The reaction of the Athenians to Paul’s speech was exactly like that of a modern audience – they either laughed out loud or told Paul that it was all very interesting and he must tell them more sometime. Even so, as a result of his preaching efforts ‘*some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them*’[Acts 17.34].

NOTHING HAS CHANGED!

2,000 years after Paul made his speech on Mars Hill to the most influential and intelligent people of his day, mankind is still trying to understand the world we live in. His latest effort to do this has taken shape 100m below ground in a 17km circular tunnel, full of

sophisticated equipment, beneath the border between France and Switzerland, where the Large Hadron Collider has been built in an effort to discover what has been called ‘the God particle’.



The Large Hadron Collider

The equipment is expected to provide answers to such questions as:

- What gives objects mass?
- Why is the universe full of structure and patterns?
- What holds the stars in their place?

Current theories that form the basis of modern physics leave no room for God as this world’s Creator, reducing everything to a series of complicated equations drawn up by mathematicians. But even physicists themselves acknowledge that these theories could all change completely as a result of this gigantic \$4 billion experiment, whereas the logic of Paul’s reasoning does not change, despite the passage of time.

The scepticism of our age takes many forms, but the firm faith of Paul that we see in his address is still relevant for us today. We can learn a lot from his speech on Mars Hill that can help us all in our own search for **the God we can know** if we read His own book – the Bible.

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Bible Abbreviations

READERS sometimes ask why some Biblical references have some letters shown behind them e.g. *Matthew 11.13-15 NIV*, *1 John 2.1 RSV*. The answer is that today there are various versions of the Scriptures published by different organizations. Several claim to be a modern or a more accurate translation than the Authorised Version which dates from the reign of King James 1 of England and was published in 1611. The Authorised Version, the 'AV', gradually won supremacy over all the previous versions which had been introduced in England and held its position for 270 years.

In 1881 the Revised New Testament was published and this was followed by the Revised Old Testament in 1885. Although criticised for a greater number of minor changes, especially in the New Testament, the Revised Version, the 'RV' was considered to give a more accurate text than the 'AV'.

In 1952, the Revised Standard Version was completed. The 'RSV' has since been followed by a number of versions which now are used by Bible students, especially when wishing to give the most appropriate sense to a passage that they are quoting. This in turn makes it necessary to identify the various versions by the use of abbreviations which are listed below, these being the most common in use by contributors to 'Light on a New World'.

Authorised Version	AV
Revised Version	RV
Revised Standard Version	RSV
New King James Version	NKJV
New International Version	NIV

It should be noted that NKJV is omitted when this version is quoted.

The abbreviation which indicates the version used, tells the reader that the particular text quoted may more clearly confirm the point being made by the writer. We hope that the above note may assist those who search the Scriptures, for as Jesus himself said, *'these are they which testify of me.'* [John 5.39] For more detailed information about the history of the English Bible, send for your free copy of '**Light on the Bible**'.

What did Jesus mean?

‘You must be born again’

THIS saying of Jesus forms part of a conversation he had with a man called Nicodemus, who was a leading Jew in Jerusalem and a very wealthy man. Nicodemus was a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, which was the supreme council of the Jews. Although Israel at the time was a part of the Roman Empire and was subject to Roman laws, the Jewish Sanhedrin had extensive political and administrative powers locally in Judaea and had its own team of law enforcement officers. The Sanhedrin consisted of seventy prominent men in Jerusalem, among who were the High Priest of the time, former High Priests, members of wealthy and privileged families and legal and religious experts. Nicodemus was an important person simply because he was a member of the Sanhedrin. However, it is possible that he was actually the leader of the Sanhedrin and therefore one of the most distinguished and well known Jews of his time.

WHO WERE THE PHARISEES?

Nicodemus was also a Pharisee. They were a minority religious group but influential nevertheless. They are mentioned many times in the New Testament and Jesus was mostly very critical of them. He condemned them for being over scrupulous about obeying the letter of the Jewish religious laws (‘The Law of Moses’) but failing to understand their real meaning and spirit. He called them hypocrites because so often they did not practice what they preached; he was angry with them because they supplemented ‘The Law of Moses’ with their own oral tradition, which added many unnecessary man-made requirements to God’s laws. The Pharisees made a great public show

of their righteousness, and demanded the respect of the people but Jesus found this flaunting of their religion offensive. For all these reasons, Jesus and the Pharisees never really saw eye to eye and they developed a great disliking for him, which eventually turned to hatred. In fact, they became the prime instigators of his crucifixion by accusing him of trumped-up offences against 'The Law of Moses' and they were instrumental in getting the Sanhedrin to sentence him to death.

THE END OF 'THE LAW OF MOSES'

However, there was one other very important reason why Jesus and the Pharisees so often came into conflict and this was the real reason why they decided that he could not be allowed to live any longer. The main thrust of Jesus' message was that 'The Law of Moses' had served its predetermined purpose and was therefore about to come to an end. Many of the enactments of the Law, for example the animal sacrifices, foreshadowed the coming of Jesus to offer his own life as a sacrifice for sin. Jesus told the people that he had come to fulfil 'The Law of Moses' and therefore bring it to an end. That Law was to be replaced by Christianity, a religion based on Jesus' own teaching - the Gospel (good news) of the coming kingdom of God. In reality, this was no new teaching but was founded on those great promises which had been made to the Jewish Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and David. Christianity enshrined the principles that lay behind 'The Law of Moses' but Christianity was designed to be accepted by men and women of all different nationalities, whereas 'The Law of Moses' was a national law only for the Jews.

The problem with all this was that the Pharisees were 'experts' in 'The Law of Moses.' They spent much of their time teaching its commands, answering the people's questions about it and encouraging the people to keep it; it was what their lives were all about. Jesus' message that it was now to become obsolete was therefore a great blow to them and they resisted the change as hard as they could. They were too absorbed in the letter of their law and too opposed to Jesus to

realise that they could have been important players in the conversion of people to Christianity. It was this threat to their position and to their status that lay at the heart of their opposition to Jesus.

THE CHARACTER OF NICODEMUS

Although he was a Pharisee and possibly the leader of the Jewish Council (Sanhedrin), Nicodemus seems to have been more perceptive than most of his colleagues. He had watched Jesus and had particularly noticed the miracles he had performed. He had come to the conclusion that despite his unorthodox teaching, Jesus was a force to be reckoned with. One night he came to Jesus to find out more about him. The visit took place at night because Nicodemus would have compromised his important position in the Jewish hierarchy if he were seen to be openly talking to Jesus. It appears that he came not just on his own behalf but because other members of the Sanhedrin were also curious and probably worried about the effects of Jesus' teaching.

Nicodemus, this great teacher of the Jews, greeted Jesus with respect. He called him Rabbi (teacher) and told him that he and his colleagues believed that Jesus had been sent by God. He said to Jesus: *'no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him'* [John 3.2]. We do not know what questions he was going to ask Jesus, or what matters he wanted to discuss, because Jesus immediately takes over the conversation with the rather terse and enigmatic saying *'Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God'* [John 3.3].

THE CONDITIONS FOR SALVATION

Jesus was telling him at least two things. The first is that salvation, or seeing the kingdom of God is an individual thing; *'unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God'* [John 3.3]. Each man and each woman, who wishes to reach God's kingdom must undergo what Jesus here describes as a rebirth; without that action, taken on an individual basis, salvation is impossible. The second thing that is

evident from Jesus' saying is that a substantial change is needed in a person's life. Birth is the beginning of a new life. Rebirth (being born again) can only mean that a major change must be made by anybody who is seeking salvation; a change so complete that effectively a new life is begun. Even very religious people like Nicodemus, a man who had been steeped in 'The Law of Moses' all his life, could not be exempt from this sort of change – the new birth that Jesus was referring to.

Quite naturally, Nicodemus found Jesus' words confusing at face value. Obviously it is impossible, he said, for a man to enter the second time into his mother's womb and be born again. That just cannot happen. Nicodemus, like most of the Pharisees, could not really envisage the necessity for a spiritual rebirth either. For them 'The Law of Moses' and their own oral tradition were quite sufficient; why was any change needed? What was this new and untrained Rabbi talking about? They would have thought that he was mad if it had not been for those amazing miracles that he had been performing!

THE NEED FOR BAPTISM

Jesus reinforced his initial statement with a further saying: *'Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God' [John 3.5]*. Now he was being more specific and more meaningful. The reference to being *'born of water'* is clearly a reference to baptism - a rite which Nicodemus would have been well aware of because John the Baptist had been baptising huge numbers of people over the previous few months. So what is baptism and why did Jesus tell Nicodemus that anyone who wants to be saved must be baptised?

It becomes apparent from the Bible that baptism is a vitally important subject. For example, it is directly mentioned over one hundred times in the New Testament. In addition to these direct references there are incidental allusions to baptism in both the Old and New Testaments which also highlight its importance.

‘SAVED THROUGH WATER’

An example of this is found in the first letter of Peter, where he refers to the days of Noah and the time of the flood. Out of the whole of the world’s population at that time, only Noah and his immediate family were saved because they obeyed God by building the ark. The very flood waters which destroyed everyone else, enabled the ark to float safely, thus preserving the lives of Noah and those who were with him inside it. Peter makes the point that they were therefore saved by water and he likens that to baptism. This is what he wrote:

‘...God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolises baptism that now saves you also...’ [*I Peter 3.20,21 NIV*].

Put in its simplest form, Peter’s point is this. Just as the ark floating on the flood waters was essential to the salvation of Noah and his family, so baptism in water is essential if we are to be saved. If Noah had refused to listen to God and had not been prepared to enter the ark, then he would have died like everybody else. Likewise, if we refuse to be baptised then we cannot have any hope of being saved from death.

Another illustration is given by the Apostle Paul. Like Peter he draws an analogy between an historical event recorded in the Old Testament and baptism. Paul writes about the Exodus – the way in which the Israelites left Egypt in the days of Moses, after God had brought the ten plagues on that country. God miraculously divided the waters of the Red Sea so that the Israelites could escape from the Egyptians who were pursuing them. The waters of the sea parted and the Israelites walked through the dry pathway that was formed. Above them was the cloud which represented God’s presence with them, so they had water all around them as they crossed the sea to safety. Like Noah and his family, the Israelites were saved by water and like Peter, Paul says that this also was effectively a baptism. This is what he wrote:

‘Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea’ [*I Corinthians 10.1, 2*].

Again, put in its simplest form, Paul’s point is this. Just as the Israelites passage through the divided sea under the cloud (in other words they were surrounded by water) was essential if they were to be saved from death at the hands of the Egyptians, so baptism in water is essential if we are to be saved. If the Israelites had not been prepared to cross the sea when it parted they would have died. Likewise if we refuse to be baptised, we cannot have any hope of salvation from death.

BAPTISM – THE START OF A NEW LIFE

A highly important feature of both these Old Testament illustrations is that the effective baptism marked the start of a new life. Noah and his family emerged from the ark after the flood and a whole new phase in the earth’s history began. The Israelites journey across the sea bed led them away from their life as slaves in Egypt towards a new life in the land that God had promised to give them.

When we follow this analogy through to New Testament baptism, we find the same to be true. Baptism marks a new beginning in a person’s life. This is what Jesus told Nicodemus when he described baptism as being born of water. He was saying that baptism was a fresh start, a rebirth or the beginning of a new life. Paul makes exactly the same point when he describes baptism as being the death and burial of one’s old life:

‘Therefore we are buried with him (Jesus) through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life’ [*Romans 6.4*].

WHAT IS BIBLICAL BAPTISM?

In another place Paul refers to baptism as being *'the washing of rebirth'* [Titus 3.5 NIV]. The verse in Romans which describes baptism as a death and burial, indicates the form of Biblical baptism. It was the burying in water of a person; it was complete immersion in the water, not just the sprinkling of a few drops of water on the forehead.

When Jesus spoke to Nicodemus, he said *'you must be born again'* [John 3.7]. A man is a grown up person, not a baby. In the New Testament there are no examples of young children or babies being baptised and there is a very good reason for that. Jesus and his apostles make it very clear that **belief must precede baptism**. Jesus said to his disciples:

'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.'

[Mark 16.15, 16]

Notice the order - **belief first – then baptism**. Notice also that if there was no belief then baptism did not even come into the picture; it was not relevant. An unbelieving person cannot be saved: *'he who does not believe will be condemned'*. Babies are incapable of believing, which is why there are no examples in the New Testament of them being baptised.

A NEW LIFE

Belief and baptism must be followed by a new life. As we have seen, baptism is only the beginning - the birth. Just as a natural baby grows into an adult, so spiritual growth and development must follow the *'born again'* believer. He or she must grow into the sort of person that Jesus wants to be in his coming Kingdom on earth, for that was what Jesus told Nicodemus: *'Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.'* [John 3.3]. Only those who achieve that character

development will be allowed to enter the Kingdom, and in order to enable them to enter they will undergo the second part of their rebirth. Remember the second comment of Jesus to Nicodemus:

‘...unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God’ [*John 3.5*].

Paul tells us that *‘flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God,’* [*I Corinthians 15.50*] on the basis that what is corruptible (*‘flesh and blood’*) cannot inherit what is incorruptible (*‘the Spirit’*). Those who will be privileged to inherit the Kingdom will be given eternal life by Jesus; they will be spirit beings rather than creatures of flesh and blood. Having learned about God’s plan of salvation they will have believed it; they will have been born of water – baptised as adults following that belief. They will have lived the rest of their new lives in obedience to God’s Word, building the characters that will prepare them for their reward in the Kingdom. Finally, they will have been approved by Jesus, welcomed as his friends; they will have been born of the Spirit – given eternal life and they will live for ever on the earth.

From what the Bible tells us it seems that Nicodemus, the leader of the Jewish Sanhedrin, became a follower of Jesus. He must have listened carefully to what Jesus told him and was courageous enough to put aside his lifelong Pharisaic beliefs and behaviour in favour of the true Christian way of life. We must be prepared to do the same.

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Marriage – Yes or No?

SO many children's fairy stories end with the handsome prince marrying the beautiful princess:

'... and they lived happily ever after'

Newspaper reports of the fabulous wedding celebrations of film and pop stars in exotic places, describe all the rich and famous who are there wanting to see and to be seen. The 'photo-review' magazines vie with each other to get exclusive rights to publish the pictures and the fees involved no doubt help to defray the costs of the fantastic functions. Even at a local level in the UK, marriage organisation and planning businesses report the rising sums that brides will pay for their wedding dresses which sometimes cost many hundreds of pounds.

All this contrasts with a recent headline in The Daily Telegraph:

'MARRIAGE IS FOR THE MINORITY'

'Married people are a minority in the adult population for the first time, statistics suggest. The rising divorce rate and the trend towards cohabiting have combined to ensure husbands and wives make up less than half the population.'

This conclusion is the newspaper's interpretation of a report by the Office for National Statistics based on 2005 figures. However, the report does actually make a couple of important points:

- Although trends in marriage and divorce figures suggest that a continued decline will be observed, the Office for National Statistics says, *'This is in part due to marriage occurring at later ages'*.
- The latest figures suggest that although the proportion of married people in the population will fall, still a substantial proportion of people will marry eventually.

These facts are very worrying. Quite apart from international problems – wars, terrorism, political unrest and civil strife on an unprecedented scale – social conditions seem to be worsening. It is more difficult than ever to bring up a family. Moral standards seem to be getting lower and one wonders in what kind of a world our children will be growing up.

However, many readers of 'Light on a New World' will not be surprised by these things. Those who know the Bible will remember that it tells us that we should expect a worsening of social conditions in the *'last days'* [2 Timothy 3.1-5] – the days in which we can expect the return of Jesus Christ to the earth to set up a new system of Divine government. This is the time for which Christians should daily pray, when God's kingdom will come and His will is done on earth as it is now done in heaven [see Matthew 6.10].

TWO QUESTIONS - TWO ANSWERS

There are really two aspects to the subject matter of this article:

1. What does the Bible teach about marriage for the Christian? In this article we use the name 'Christian' in the New Testament sense of a true follower of Jesus - not one who is a Christian in name only.
2. Does the Bible have anything to say about non-Christian marriages today?

Marital problems are not new. Jesus spoke about the ‘irretrievable breakdown’ of marriage (to use a modern phrase) when the Pharisees tried to trip him up with their questions. Jesus pointed out that divorce was not something that his followers should contemplate:

“Haven’t you read”, he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female’, and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh?’ So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.” “Why then”, they asked, “did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?” Jesus replied, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning” [Matthew 19. 4–8 NIV].

In other words, divorce had been permitted in Old Testament times, in very specific circumstances, because of the ‘hardness’ of people’s hearts, but the standard that Jesus expected from his followers was that set by God in the very beginning. He made one man and one woman to be companions, to be ‘helps’ to each other [see Genesis 2.18].

BE UNITED

If a Christian couple are to be real companions and are going to be able to help each other in their lives together, the marriage must start off on the right foundation. Husband and wife need to be absolutely united in all the things that really matter. Not only will the couple have talked about how they are going to deal with money matters, where they are going to live and about having children – so that they will know that they will be pulling in the same direction when they are married, but they will be united in the fundamentals of their Christian faith. Not only is unity in matters of belief a necessity in the Christian marriage, it is a Divine command – ‘*only in the Lord*’ is an expression used by Paul in a letter to first century Christians [I Corinthians 7.39].

For the Christian to consider marrying someone whose life is not built on the same sure foundation of Christian belief, is not only disobedience, but it would be a recipe for disaster.

THE PATTERN OF ISRAEL

The strong language of the Bible, when speaking of the disobedience of the nation of Israel in Old Testament times, is an indication of God's mind. The people of Israel were commanded not to allow their sons and daughters to marry into the surrounding nations. The foreign nations would lead them astray from God and would encourage a way of life that would undermine their obedience to God's law. Time and time again the prophets likened the way in which Israel was influenced by the behaviour and practices of other nations, to prostitution and sexual immorality.

The Old Testament prophet, Ezekiel, said that Jerusalem, *'lusted for the neighbouring Assyrians'*, just like her sister Samaria *'she lusted for them'* and the result was that her mind was *'alienated'* [Ezekiel 23. 12, 16, 17]. The whole of this chapter is a description of the state into which Israel had fallen.

The Apostle Paul told his readers on a number of occasions to *'be of one mind'* [2 Corinthians 13.11 AV]. He also exhorted the Ephesians to *'walk worthy ...endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace'*[Ephesians 4.1,3 AV]. If this was important in the church, the community of believers, how much more essential is it for husband and wife to be *'of one mind'* over the very basis of what life is all about.

'BUT NOBODY IS PERFECT'

However solid the foundation of a marriage may be, problems are going to arise. There are going to be times when there are disagreements. There will be occasions when one partner does something, or says something which upsets the other. The Christian will recognise that the same principle which affects husbands and wives also affects all our relationships as true followers of Christ.

Peter asked Jesus, *‘how many times shall I forgive my brother?’* [Matthew 18.21 NIV] In general, the question could equally be, *‘How many times shall I forgive my husband?’* or *‘How many times should I forgive my wife?’* Peter recognised that you have to be forgiving to begin with – but how long do you go on forgiving? He asked, *‘Up to seven times?’* Surely, after that it is reasonable to say, *‘Enough is enough!’* if they go on doing the same thing. Jesus replied: *‘...I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times’* [Matthew 18.22 NIV].

In other words, how ever many times we are upset, we must go on and on and on forgiving – just as we expect God to go on and on forgiving us. This is the very practical reason why the Christian, as well as trying to be obedient to the commands of Christ, cannot contemplate divorce. True Christian forgiveness means receiving back again – whatever the wrong that has been done. The parable of the Prodigal Son shows this [Luke 15.11-32]. Divorce closes the door to the restoration of unity and harmony. It bars the way to the receiving back again.

A VERY HIGH STANDARD

There are going to be times when we fail in our marriage relationships just as we fail in other aspects of our lives, but our heavenly Father has promised to forgive us as we forgive those who trespass against us.

This sets a very high standard for Christian marriage. The Apostle Paul, in more than one place, says that the relationship between husband and wife is just like the relationship between Christ and his church. Jesus did everything he possibly could for his brethren and sisters. This was the extent of his love for them – he gave his very life and Paul reminds us: *‘So husbands ought to love their own wives’* [Ephesians 5.28].

As followers of Jesus, and because he has done so much for us, we want to live our lives in a way that will please him. So Paul wrote:

'just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything' [Ephesians 5.24].

In any marriage, however close the unity of minds, however strong the sense of pulling in the same direction, there will come a time when there needs to be a final decision maker. For the true Christian there is no problem about this: *'as also Christ is the head of the church: and he is the Saviour of the body...so, (Paul argues) the husband is the head of the wife' [Ephesians 5.23] and he continues:*

'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband' [Ephesians 5.31–33 NIV].

Please read the whole passage in Ephesians Chapter 5, from verse 21 to the end of the chapter.

THE PATTERN OF BROKEN MARRIAGES TODAY

Sir Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi wrote:

'We have divorced sex from love, love from commitment, marriage from having children and having children from responsibility for their care.' [The Jewish Chronicle 9.12.1994]

Our second question was really asking if the Bible has anything to say about the general attitude of people to marriage today. One of the problems of Noah's time and which caused God to pour out His judgements on the earth in the great flood was that, *'The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time.'* [Genesis 6.5 NIV] Jesus said that the people of Noah's day were only

interested in their own pleasure *'eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage'* [Matthew 24.38 NIV].

What is particularly important is that Jesus said that the same description would apply in the time immediately before his return. Of the people of Noah's day, He said that they *'knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man'* [Matthew 24.39 NIV]. Note the final sentence of the words of Jesus here – *'That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of man'*.

This is how it is – **NOW!**

The followers of Christ must be very careful that the godlessness which characterizes so many people today does not influence them. The Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy to warn him that this would be one of the perils of the last days:

'...There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God – having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them' [2 Timothy 3.1–5 NIV].

Look at this list again and think of these characteristics in relation to marriage problems today.

UNITY IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD

We should, of course, be trying to set high standards in our own lives, not only in marriage, but also in all our activities. Then when Jesus returns to establish God's kingdom, and to put right all that is wrong in the world, we will be recognised as his friends:

‘Greater love has no one than this, to lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do whatever I command you’ [*John 15.13,14*].

The Bible makes it clear that Christians must prepare themselves for the second coming of Christ by believing in him and the hope of salvation that God has offered through him. This belief then has to be demonstrated by obedience – ‘*You are my friends, if...*’ – and by continuing to live lives motivated by his teaching.

If the relationship between Christ and his followers is the pattern for Christian marriage today as the Bible teaches, then the unity that exists now between Christ and his Father will be the pattern of the relationship that his followers hope to enjoy with him in the kingdom. However, we must get our priorities right: ‘*seek first his kingdom and his righteousness*’ [*Matthew 6.33 NIV*].

If we do – if our faith and belief is followed by obedience, first in baptism [*Mark 16.16*] and by our efforts to continue faithfully, then we will be included among those for whom Jesus prayed: ‘*that they all may be one, as you, Father, are in me, and I in you*’ [*John 17.21*].

Then, when he comes, we will be among those who are described in the last book of the Bible, who will be welcomed into the ‘*marriage supper of the Lamb*’ [*Revelation 19.9*].

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Marvellous are Your Works'

WHEN designing a Rolls Royce car the manufacturers of these famous vehicles build in what is known as 'redundancy'. For example, they always have no less than three braking systems, which, as one Company official succinctly put it, 'makes quite, quite sure'. Things go wrong – that is life, but if all three braking systems on a Rolls Royce car failed, at least the makers could not be accused of ignoring the safety of their clients. They really had done their best.

Redundancy of this sort characterises quality engineering. Commercial aircraft manufacturers amongst others, build control systems in such a way that they are 'fail-safe'. In order to do this the computer systems by which an aircraft is controlled are not merely duplicated, but made in triplicate. Furthermore there is also a built-in 'voting system', where if one system 'disagrees' with the other two it is sidelined, and 'voted' out of action. Any fault therefore, in one system will simply cause it to be closed down.

The chance of two systems simultaneously going wrong in the same way, and 'voting' a remaining 'good' system out of action, is so small as to be ignored. There are endless examples of this in the modern world. Where there is a possibility that failure will cause serious problems, perhaps even death, good design will always have 'redundant' systems.

When we look for examples of design 'redundancy' in the living world we find them everywhere. Kidneys are the classic example. Each of the two human kidneys has an over-capacity of about ten times; that is to say each could if required, deal with ten times the

amount of filtering that the body usually requires. This means that the normal human body has an over-capacity for eliminating waste of some 20-fold. We could quite happily, exist with one kidney as many people do. So the extra kidney and the extra capacity, is undoubtedly an example of design ‘redundancy’.

To most people the appendix merely represents nuisance value. Appendicitis is a very painful and occasionally fatal condition. Years ago this little organ was removed at the first sign of trouble, but in recent years the medical profession has generally become more and more reluctant to do this, despite the problems it can cause. Why? Because research showed that those who had lost their appendix suffered poorer health in later life. Clearly we can get along without the appendix. However, its position is just right so that it can act as an early warning system for infections in the lower intestine. It is an integral part of the immune system of the body – and as such the appendix is a very good example of ‘redundancy’ in design.

There are many people with only one functioning eye, or one hand, or one useful ear; yet life is still perfectly possible, if somewhat diminished. The body’s systems are built superlatively redundantly, so that loss or degradation of one part rarely means serious problems (with one or two exceptions, of course). This is incontrovertible evidence, a clear proof that we have been designed.

Design ‘redundancy’ is a product of a loving God working for us. He produced bodies which can cope with the curse of mortality and often do so for most of our lives without giving us more than mild disabilities or discomfort. We may be deeply grateful that we were created by God as the Psalmist acknowledged, else things would be very different in all sorts of ways: *‘For you have formed my inward parts; you have covered me in my mother’s womb. I will praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made...’* [Psalm 139.13,14].

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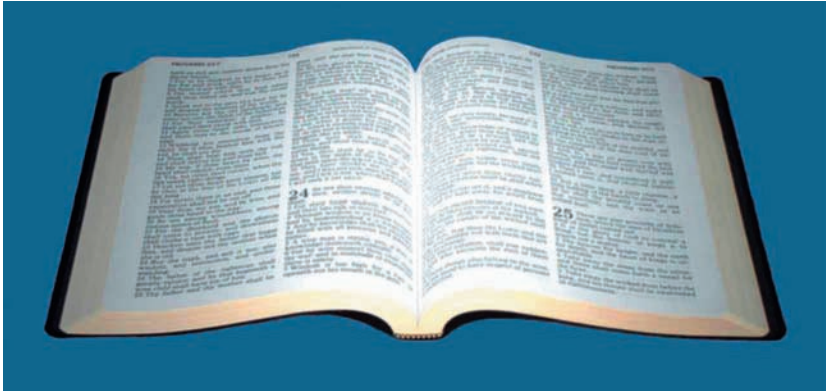
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