

Light

A vibrant tropical beach scene. In the foreground, a colorful wooden boat with blue, yellow, and red sections is partially visible on the sandy shore. Several tall palm trees with lush green fronds lean across the frame from the left. The middle ground shows a clear blue ocean with gentle waves lapping at the beach. In the background, a large, steep, green mountain rises against a bright blue sky with scattered white clouds. The overall atmosphere is bright and sunny.

...on a New World

*Published for the
Bexley Christadelphian Ecclesia (Dawn Fellowship) by*



*Light Bible Publications,
PO Box 760
Bexley, Kent
DA5 1UB, England*

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VOLUME TWENTY ONE NUMBER TWO

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Cover picture: 'Caribbean Island of St Lucia'.

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

Parables of Jesus

INTRODUCTION

IN this article we consider three short parables of Jesus. Each of them is concerned with an aspect of the life of a believer. ‘The Parable of the Cross’ speaks of the life of self denial that a follower of Jesus voluntary takes on at baptism. ‘The Parable of the Salt’ refers to the Godly qualities and the disciplined way of life that must characterise the life of a disciple of Jesus. ‘The Parable of the Lamp and the Basket’ teaches the followers of Jesus to spread the light of the gospel message by the way they live.

THE CROSS

On one occasion, when Jesus was teaching a large crowd of people, he said to them *‘And whoever does not bear his cross and come after me cannot be my disciple’* [Luke 14.27]. At another time, when he was speaking to his twelve disciples, he said much the same thing: *‘he who does not take his cross and follow after me is not worthy of me’* [Matthew 10.38].

Jesus knew that he was going to offer his life as a sacrifice for sin and this would involve him being crucified. In the Roman Empire in New Testament times a person who was going to be crucified was often required to carry to the place of his crucifixion the cross on which he was about to be killed. Jesus himself had to carry his cross although, because of his own physical weakness, after he had been beaten by the Roman soldiers, another man (Simon of Cyrene) was conscripted to help him [Matthew 27.32]. Three days after his crucifixion God raised Jesus from the dead and gave him eternal life.



Simon of Cyrene carrying the cross of Christ

A disciple is literally a pupil or a student – one who learns from another person and follows them. Jesus appears to be teaching that anyone who wants to be his disciple and gain the gift of eternal life must, like him, first bear his own cross to his own crucifixion.

Did he actually mean that only those who suffered martyrdom would be saved? At first sight it seems that he did mean this, because in the passage in Matthew chapter 10 Jesus goes on to say that *'he who loses his life for my sake will*

find it [Matthew 10.39]. He seems to be suggesting that only those who literally sacrifice their lives in service to God as he did, will be rewarded with eternal life as he was. We know that some of his followers did allow themselves to be killed for their faith. James, one of the twelve, was an example of this [Acts 12.1, 2] and Stephen was another [Acts 7.59].

However, further investigation reveals that Jesus was not actually referring to literal cross-bearing and crucifixion in the case of most of his disciples. For example, the gospel writer Luke records another occasion when Jesus referred to this same subject of cross-bearing. On that occasion Jesus said *'If any man will come after me, let him **deny himself**, and take up his cross **daily**, and follow me'* [Luke 9.23 AV].

Two words are important in this verse. First, Jesus says here that anyone who will come after him (i.e. be one of his disciples) must take up his cross **daily** and one cannot literally be crucified on a daily basis. The second point is that Jesus here indicates that this daily cross-bearing takes the form of **self-denial**.

The follower of Jesus – the person who is hoping to receive the gift of eternal life – must change their way of life in order to become a disciple. Jesus often exhorted his followers to repent, a word which means to ‘think differently’. On becoming a Christian, one changes one’s thought processes, way of life and objectives. The Apostle Paul refers to this in his letter to the Romans. He says of the newly baptised Christian *‘our old man was crucified with him [Jesus], that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin’ [Romans 6.6]*.

In the same chapter he refers again to the new Christian as having changed masters and loyalties – *‘you were slaves of sin, yet...having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness’ [Romans 6.17,18]*. It was this *‘newness of life’ [Romans 6.4]* of the believer that Jesus was referring to when he spoke about the necessity for cross-bearing and self-denial by those who would be his followers. Like Jesus, they would understand that life as we know it now is not an end in itself, but a time of preparation for eternal life in the coming Kingdom of God upon earth. Jesus said to the twelve:

‘there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for my sake and the gospel’s, who shall not receive...in the age to come, eternal life’ [*Mark 10.29,30*].

SALT

Salt has two main functions – preserving and flavouring food. In his teaching about salt, Jesus is concerned with the second. In what

has become known as his ‘Sermon on the Mount’ he said to his disciples *‘You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its taste, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men’* [Matthew 5.13].

Most of the salt we use in the UK is a chemical compound and rarely loses its saltiness. However, in Palestine in the time of Jesus the salt used was impure to some extent, often having been obtained from salt lakes or from marshes by the sea shore. It would sometimes be stored on the ground until it was needed. Such salt could lose its saltiness, by exposure either to earth, sun, air or rain and was then useless for flavouring food, and it had no other purpose. It would destroy the fertility of any land on to which it was thrown and so would simply be cast out into the street – hence Jesus’ comment on another occasion: *‘Salt is good; but if the salt has lost its taste, how shall it be seasoned? It is neither fit for the land nor for the dunghill, but men throw it out’* [Luke 14.34,35].

In the earlier verses in Matthew chapter 5 Jesus described the hallmarks of his true disciples. They were:

- * Poorness of spirit (verse 3)
- * Meekness (verse 5)
- * A hunger and thirst for righteousness (verse 6)
- * Mercy (verse 7)
- * Purity of heart (verse 8)
- * Peacemaking (verse 9)

It was these qualities that represented their saltiness. These were the things that gave them flavour and savour in God’s sight. When the Apostle Paul later wrote to the Christians at Corinth he said that they were *‘unto God a sweet savour’* [2 Corinthians 2.15 AV]. Here the word ‘*savour*’ is a reference to believers being a sweet smell to God, whereas in Jesus’ parable of the salt the reference is to them being a pleasing addition to flavour, but the principle is the same. By developing the

characteristics that God wanted to see in them, the disciples of Jesus give Him pleasure.

There were of course some disciples who lost their way and did not maintain their calling. These, says Jesus, are like the salt that lost its saltiness; they were *'good for nothing'* insofar as God's purpose is concerned. This is a very stern warning which all disciples of Christ do well to bear in mind.

In the other reference to salt, Jesus says that *'everyone will be seasoned with fire, and every sacrifice will be salted with salt. Salt is good, but if the salt loses its taste, how will you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and have peace with one another'* [Mark 9.49, 50].

This follows on directly from the teaching of Jesus about the things which cause us to stumble before God. He had commanded his followers to adopt a very disciplined approach to life by resolutely removing from their lives any causes of stumbling. The phrase *'seasoned'* (or *'salted'* per the AV) *with fire* seems to be a reference back to the sacrifices under the Law of Moses. Every grain offering had to be seasoned with salt before being offered to God *'by fire'* [Leviticus 2.13]. We know that the lives of Jesus' disciples are to be presented to God as *'a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God'* [Romans 12.1]. Jesus seems to be saying that the lives of his disciples need to be *'seasoned'* with the salt of self-discipline if they are to be acceptable sacrifices to God.

Salt was also used as the mark of a covenant or agreement between people. There are references in the old Testament to a *'covenant of salt'* [Numbers 18.19 and 2 Chronicles 13.5]. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is saying that those disciples who are agreed among themselves on the disciplined way of life which God requires of them - a life *'seasoned with fire and every sacrifice...salted with salt'* - will have peace among themselves - a peace which cannot be shared with those who have lost their saltiness [Mark 9.50].

THE LAMP AND THE BASKET

Jesus said to his disciples:

‘You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven’ [Matthew 5.14-16].

In the parable about salt Jesus was encouraging his disciples to be concerned about their own lives. In this parable he deals with the impact their lives should be having on others. The key to the parable is in the last sentence which refers to the shining of a light. The teaching of Jesus about salvation was like a lamp – it illuminated the lives of those who receive it joyfully.



Matthew describes the effect of his preaching in the following way: *‘The people who sat in darkness saw a great light, and upon those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned’* [Matthew 4.16]. In John’s gospel it is said of Jesus: *‘In him was life, and the life was the light of men’* [John 1.4]. Jesus described himself in the following way, *‘I am the light of the world. He who follows me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life’* [John 8.12]. When the Apostle Paul wrote to the believers at Ephesus he reminded them that they *‘were once darkness, but now...are light in the Lord’* and he exhorted them to

'live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth)' [Ephesians 5.8,9 NIV].

So both Jesus and his disciples are *'the light of the world'*. By his sacrifice for sin Jesus made salvation available to everyone in the world and the eleven disciples were commanded to preach the gospel message worldwide: *'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature' [Mark 16.15]*. Other disciples, who were not predominantly preachers, were to let their light shine out in their good works, by the way they lived and behaved on a day to day basis – in the hope and expectation that others would be favourably impressed and influenced by those good works so that they too would glorify God.

No sensible person, says Jesus, would light a candle and then hide it either under a measuring container such as a basket *[Matthew 5.15]* or under some other *'vessel'* or *'under a bed'* *[Luke 8.16]*. Instead, they would put it on a lampstand so that the entire household would benefit from the light it provided. In the same way the disciples were not to hide their light but to let it *'shine before men'* *[Matthew 5.16]*. To use Jesus' words, their calling as his followers was to be as obvious as *'a city that is set on a hill (which) cannot be hidden'* *[Matthew 5.14]*.

CONCLUSION

Jesus taught that, for his disciples, as for himself, the present life is intended to be a time of training and preparation for their reward in the coming Kingdom of God upon earth. These three parables emphasise some aspects of that preparation, and show the sort of people that believers should become as they try to be more like Jesus day by day.

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What did Jesus Mean?

‘Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man’

JESUS told his followers that *‘unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you’* [John 6.53]. Ever since Jesus ate with his disciples before his arrest and crucifixion, his followers have repeated that final meal, usually every first day of the week, remembering his words as he broke bread with his disciples: *‘Take, eat; this is my body’* [Matthew 26.26]. Did Jesus really mean to say in those two statements that the bread and wine partaken of in this memorial meal are changed into the real body and blood of Christ? Did he really mean that as we do this, we literally change the bread into his real body?

Our contention is that nothing could be further from the meaning of these words of Jesus. The bread and wine that we eat and drink in this special way, are nothing more nor less than a remembrance of his unique life and death, which we imbibe as a kind of spiritual food. The essence of this food is in the words that he spoke for therein lies their ability to give life. To say that they change into the real body and blood of Jesus, as many Christians believe, is a superstition that has no foundation in Bible teaching. It was not until 1215AD that transubstantiation was made an article of faith in the Catholic Church.

THE FEEDING OF THE FIVE THOUSAND

In looking at the context of Jesus’ words, in John chapter six, we need to distinguish miraculous events from comments and allusions

that were clearly intended to be symbolic. Jesus had just performed the miracle, or sign of the feeding of the five thousand by the Sea of Galilee, in which five barley loaves were multiplied to feed this great, hungry multitude. Miracles are always called signs in John's gospel, thus emphasising the meaning of the action. (See for example John 4.54; 6.14; 9.16 and 11.47). So plenteous did this food become that twelve baskets of fragments were taken up at the end only *'the Prophet who is to come into the world'*, the Messiah who would save Israel from the Roman yoke, could display such God-given power [John 6.1-14]. This was reason enough for elements in the crowd to take him by force and make him king. But Jesus was not to be compelled to take up his kingly role in this way. The cross by which he would save his people had to come before the crown. And so Jesus slipped away from the multitude.

The multitude, however, were eager to find this miracle-worker and the next day they found him on the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus' journey across the sea had involved a miracle. He had appeared to his disciples in their boat, in the midst of a storm walking on the water [John 6. 15-21]. What followed was a long conversation between Jesus and the Jewish crowd [John 6. 29-59] about the significance of the miracle of feeding the five thousand, during which he made the statement that so many have misunderstood from that day to this:

'...Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you' [John 6.53].

MANNA FROM HEAVEN

The first issue for discussion was the reason for the crowd's pursuit of Jesus after the miracle, about which Jesus had no illusions: *'you seek me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled'* [John 6.26]. They were excited by the abundance of the miraculously given food that had kept them from starvation. But

food naturally perishes as we do; not so the spiritual food that it represents. *'Do not labour for the food which perishes'*, Jesus told them, *'but for the food which endures to everlasting life,'* [John 6.27] which only he could give them. How could they labour for this food, asked the crowd? By believing in the one whom God had sent, that is Jesus, was the answer.

The Jewish crowd had seen the parallel between Jesus' miracle and the Manna, literally bread from heaven, during their wilderness journey centuries before, that had then saved them from starvation [Exodus 16.14]. Was Jesus another Moses, they asked, who could provide for their material wants? Again they were missing the same spiritual point of that miracle of earlier times. *'Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and are dead'*, said Jesus [John 6.49]. The miraculously provided food had only kept them alive from day to day; they still died in the natural course of events. The same would be true of the loaves and the fishes abundantly provided in the feeding of the five thousand.

THE BREAD OF LIFE

Not so the spiritual bread symbolised in these two miraculous provisions, if we accept that manna in the wilderness was a type of Jesus as the bread of life. *'I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live for ever'* [John 6.51]. This is symbolic language; more explicitly Jesus said: *'he who believes in me has everlasting life'* [John 6.47]. The plain language of verse forty seven explains the symbolism of verse fifty one, giving us the real meaning of Jesus' difficult statement that *'unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man ... you have no life in you'* [verse 53]. It becomes clear that unless we believe in the words and work of Jesus as the Son of God we cannot be saved by the offering of himself.

Notice our reference to the words of Jesus. Specifically, it is those words that give us life, if we listen to them and then follow them. As Jesus goes on to say: *'The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they*

are life [John 6.63]. This is a truth that Peter acknowledged: *'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life'* [John 6.68]. This is the spiritual food that can nourish eternally if we allow it into our hearts. The bread and the wine are symbols of this reality. This use of symbolic language was not unusual. Elsewhere in John's gospel Jesus refers to himself in symbol – the following are examples of this:

- * 'I am the door' [John 10.9]
- * 'I am the good shepherd' [John 10.14]
- * 'I am the true vine' [John 15.1]

The literal-minded crowd could not grasp the distinction between the actual food, miraculously provided and that which it symbolised. *'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?'* they asked [John 6.52]. But with the clear record before us we need not fall into the same error.

TAKE EAT

We now have the answer to the question we asked at the outset about the significance of eating the bread at the disciples' memorial meal. Christendom has given this meal many names, including Holy Communion, Eucharist, Mass, the Lord's Supper. We prefer to call it 'the breaking of bread' (see for example Acts 20.7 and I Corinthians 10.16). The feeding of the five thousand happened much earlier than the Last Supper yet the same symbolism applied. When Jesus broke bread with his disciples at the Last Supper commanding them to *'Take, eat; this is my body'*, he was no more telling them to eat his actual flesh then than on that earlier occasion by the Sea of Galilee.

THIS IS MY BLOOD

Bread, however, was only one element of that meal. After breaking bread Jesus took a cup of wine and having given thanks gave it to his

disciples with the command to *'Drink from it, all of you'* [Matthew 26.27]. The wine had a symbolism similar to that of the bread: *'this is my blood of the new covenant,'* Jesus went on to say, *'which is shed for many for the remission of sins'* [Matthew 26.28]. In a few hours Jesus was to make the supreme sacrifice of himself on the cross. A blameless man, the shedding of his blood made Jesus the perfect sacrifice, enabling him to save his disciples from their sins and so liberate them from the mortality which is the consequence of man's sin.

By commanding his followers to eat bread and drink wine at a memorial meal, Jesus urged them to show in symbol their belief in the salvation that can only come from his words and work and to make that belief the governing force in their lives. Since that first memorial meal, the disciples of Jesus have faithfully carried out his instruction to *'proclaim the Lord's death till he comes'* [1 Corinthians 11.26].

To believe that the bread and the wine change into the real body and blood of Christ obscures the spiritual meaning of what is essentially a symbolic act. Only by rejecting that superstition can disciples of Jesus begin to imbibe the life-giving meaning of the words and work of their master as the bread of life.

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Bible Teaching about...

The Holy Spirit

ABOUT two thousand years ago, a group of men met together in a house in Jerusalem. The book of Acts records what followed in these words:

‘...suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them forked tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance’

[Acts 2.2-4].

The immediate result of this strange phenomenon was that these ordinary men were able to speak in other languages, so that they could be understood by visitors to Jerusalem from many parts of the ancient world. This is the account of the receiving of the Holy Spirit by the apostles of Jesus. It was a momentous occasion and it was to have a profound affect on the 1st Century Christian church. On that day alone three thousand new believers were baptised in Jerusalem.

WHAT IS THE HOLY SPIRIT?

Traditional Christian teaching claims that the Holy Spirit is part of the Godhead – the third person of the Trinity. Many Christians also claim that they possess the power of the Holy Spirit and are, like those first century apostles, able to speak with tongues and perform miracles. The Bible, however, does not give support to either of these claims.

THE 'HOLY SPIRIT' AND 'THE SPIRIT OF GOD'

The phrase '*Holy Spirit*', with a few exceptions, is exclusive to the New Testament. However, it is clear that the Holy Spirit in the New Testament is the same as the Spirit of God in the Old Testament. Two examples in the New Testament will illustrate this.

On the occasion referred to above, the Apostle Peter explained to the amazed crowds just what this wonderful display of Holy Spirit power was. He referred to the words of the prophet Joel (see Joel 2.28-32):

'And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, your old men shall dream dreams. And on my menservants and on my maidservants I will pour out my Spirit in those days; and they shall prophesy.' [*Acts 2.17,18*].

Peter recognised that the power that had just descended upon those first century believers, was the Spirit of God spoken of by the prophet.

The Lord Jesus himself drew the same inference after he received the power of the Holy Spirit at his baptism. Preaching to the Jews in the synagogue, he read these words of the prophet Isaiah (See Isaiah 61.1,2) :

'The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to preach the acceptable year of the LORD' [*Luke 4.18, 19*].

When Jesus had finished this reading from Isaiah, he added these words: '*Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing*' [*Luke 4.21*]. Jesus having been filled with the Holy Spirit, applied the words of that prophecy to himself.

THE SPIRIT IS GOD'S POWER

In the New Testament, the Greek word translated Spirit is '*pneuma*'; in the Old Testament the Hebrew word is '*ruach*'. Both these words mean 'breath' or 'wind', giving the idea of an invisible, immaterial power and when used in association with God, both refer to His power. For example, in the Genesis account of creation we read of the creative power of the Spirit of God:

'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light", and there was light' [*Genesis 1.1-3*].

The spirit or power of God also continuously sustains the life that God created. This is recognised by Elihu, when he spoke to Job about the greatness of God. He acknowledged that he was created by the power of God. He also recognised that it was God's spirit or breath which kept him alive and that God could withdraw that breath of life whenever He wished:

'The Spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life...If he should set his heart on it, if he should gather to himself his Spirit and his breath, all flesh would perish together, and man would return to dust.'

[Job 33.4; 34.14,15]

GOD'S POWER USED FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES

Not only does God use His Spirit power to create and sustain all life, He also uses it in particular ways for the furtherance of His specific purpose which is to fill the earth with His glory (see Numbers 14.21).

The word 'Holy' means 'separate' and from Scriptural usage in both Old and New Testaments, the Holy Spirit refers to the power of God

used for His specific purpose with creation. This specific purpose of God involves the calling out of a people for His Name. In Old Testament times this people was the nation of Israel (See for example Deuteronomy 7.6-9). In New Testament times, the call was extended to include faithful individuals from all nations on earth.

There are many instances recorded in the Old Testament where God gave His Spirit to individuals so that they could work out His purpose with His people. In the period of the Judges, when Israel were establishing themselves in the promised land, God bestowed His Spirit on certain men. We read for example that the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah [*Judges 11.29*]. The Spirit of the Lord also came upon Samson [*Judges 13.24, 25*]. Through the Spirit of the Lord these men performed mighty feats and they were able to defeat the enemies of God's people.

The Apostle Peter tells us that the Old Testament Scriptures were written under the direct influence of the Holy Spirit:

'For prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.'

[*2 Peter 1.21*]

Paul makes it clear that when Peter is referring to the Holy Spirit he is referring to God's spirit power for he wrote: '*All Scripture is given by inspiration of God...*' [*2 Timothy 3. 16*]. Literally this means by the breath of God, that is through the Spirit of God.

THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE FIRST CENTURY AD

The most notable manifestation of the Holy Spirit was in New Testament times. This was the time of transition from the Old Testament Mosaic era to the establishment of Christianity and the spread of the Gospel to all nations. Jesus, the promised Jewish Messiah, was born by the power of the Holy Spirit. Luke records the

angel's words to Mary before he was born: '*...The Holy Spirit shall come upon you, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow you; therefore, also, that holy one who is to be born will be called the Son of God*' [Luke 1.35].

It must be seen here that '*the Holy Spirit*' and the '*power of the Highest*' are interchangeable phrases, which confirm that the Holy Spirit is none other than the power of Almighty God Himself and not a separate person. This angelic announcement also makes nonsense of the concept of the Trinity - the concept that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit, was the son of the Father and yet also was co-equal and co-eternal with them both!

At his baptism we have already noted how the Holy Spirit descended (in bodily shape like a dove) upon Jesus and that being full of the Holy Spirit he returned from Jordan. He went throughout the towns and villages of Galilee and Judaea, teaching and performing miracles. He healed the sick, he made the blind to see, the deaf to hear and caused the lame to walk. He was even able to raise the dead. All these were signs so that people should believe, as we read in John's gospel record: '*these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name*' [John 20.31].

The teaching of Jesus ran contrary to established orthodox religious teaching, but the power of the Holy Spirit gave Jesus authority to challenge the religious attitudes and gave the people evidence that his power was from a higher authority than those leaders. For as the record tells us: '*he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.*' [Matthew 7.29]. All this Jesus was able to do through the power of the Holy Spirit received from his Father, as he said to the Jews, '*the Son can do nothing of himself, but what he sees the Father do*' [John 5.19].

Before he ascended to heaven, Jesus promised the disciples that they too would receive the power of the Holy Spirit so that they could

witness to the truth of Jesus 'in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth' [Acts 1.8]. We noted at the beginning of this article the wonderful effect this had on the disciples, how that visitors from all over the world were able to hear the Gospel message in their own language.

The apostles went on to perform many wonderful miracles with this power. It was through the power of the Holy Spirit that Peter was able to expose the hypocrisy of Ananias and Sapphira with such awesome consequences [Acts 5.1-11]. It was by the same power that he healed a man who had been lame from birth [Acts 3.7]. Many who were sick were healed [Acts 19.11,12] and even the dead were raised to life [Acts 9.40]. The Apostle Paul was bitten by a viper when he was shipwrecked on the island of Melita (Malta) on his way to Rome,. The terrified islanders waited for him to fall down dead. The fact that he did not was a fulfilment of the words of Jesus when he sent out the disciples to preach the Gospel:

‘...these signs (said Jesus) will follow those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; they will take up serpents; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover [Mark 16.17,18].

DO BELIEVERS POSSESS THE HOLY SPIRIT TODAY?

Now the question arises – does this power of the Holy Spirit operate through believers in these days in the same way as it did in those New Testament times? A careful reading of the Scriptures indicates that it does not. Those gifts of the Holy Spirit were given for the specific purpose of establishing the early Christian church in a hostile world. When Jesus was taken from among them, the infant church was threatened by both Judaism and Paganism. The New Testament Scriptures were not yet written to fully expound the work of Christ as the promised Messiah. He was leaving the believers in such a vulnerable state and he promised them help:

‘But the Helper, which is the Holy Spirit...will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you [*John 14.26*].

This was one of the reasons why the Holy Spirit was sent – to bring all things to their remembrance. When the New Testament Scriptures were completed this was no longer necessary.

A FIRST-FRUITS

When the Holy Spirit was poured out at Pentecost, Peter recognised it as being a fulfilment of the prophecy of Joel. Now Peter clearly relates this prophecy of Joel to ‘*the last days*’ and although this undoubtedly referred to the last days of the Jewish Nation (Jerusalem was destroyed in AD 70), a study of Joel will show that the complete fulfilment of this prophecy is still future. The feast of Pentecost however, was also known as the feast of first-fruits, when Israel rejoiced before God in thanksgiving for the first-fruits of the harvest, a token of the greater harvest that was to come later in the year.

In the same way, this outpouring of the Holy Spirit was a visible measure of the greater revelation of God’s power that will be seen in the age to come. The Apostle Paul wrote about those who had partaken of the Holy Spirit as having ‘*tasted...the powers of the age to come*’ [*Hebrews 6.5*].

A MORE EXCELLENT WAY

Writing to the believers at Corinth, Paul indicated that the gifts of the Holy Spirit would cease when the full knowledge of the Gospel was revealed. The various gifts were to enable the church to become a living body working in harmony. But he spoke of ‘*a more excellent way*’ [*1 Corinthians 12.31*] and emphasised the need for love, because:

‘Love never fails. But whether there be prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease;

whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect (or complete) has come, then that which is in part will be done away' [*1 Corinthians 13.8-10*].

Paul is referring here to the completion of the New Testament by the power of the Holy Spirit. Faith, hope and love were to remain, but the gifts of the Holy Spirit which had revealed knowledge and prophecies only in part, were to be succeeded by a more excellent way – the full revelation of the Gospel message through Jesus Christ in the New Testament Scriptures.

So the gifts of the Holy Spirit were withdrawn when the New Testament was completed. Paul could not be referring here to the cessation of the Holy Spirit gifts at a still future date, because when Jesus returns the power of the Holy Spirit will also return in full measure. The first century gifts were a first-fruits, a token of the powers of the age to come. Faith and hope will then give way to sight and realisation and love will be paramount. Until that time, the Spirit Word in the Holy Scriptures, is sufficient for salvation as we learn from the Apostle Paul's advice to his son in the faith, Timothy:

'...continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. 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 complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work [*2 Timothy 3. 14-17*].

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The Bible is Right

Written in the Heavens

THE Bible is unrivaled as an historical book. We believe that the reason for this is its Divine authorship; He moved men to speak and record His words: *‘for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit’* [2 Peter 1.21].

TWO POINTS OF VIEW

The Bible often gives us two perspectives of events – one, from the perspective of men and the other from a Divine perspective. A man’s view tells us what people were thinking at the time. It provides a real connection to the past because we can relate their experiences to our own. God’s view provides us with His limitless wisdom and how it relates to His everlasting plan, detailed in the Gospel, as shown for example, by Paul’s teaching in Galatians chapter 3. When we read His view, we are often amazed at how different this is from the human viewpoint. God said: *“my thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways my ways,” says the LORD’* [Isaiah 55.8].

God’s point of view cannot be found anywhere except in the Bible but many people do not accept this. They will not accept this statement and so they either treat the Bible like any other ancient historical book (containing half-truths i.e. some things are right, some are wrong) or they directly attack the Bible in an attempt to show its inaccuracies. In our modern era this is often done through the process of scientific thought. Here is how their logic works – since the Bible is nothing more than the knowledge of men in ancient times, scientists should be

able to show that the Bible is incorrect. An example of this is found in the words of the 20th century's most famous physicist, Albert Einstein. In 1954, he said: '*...the Bible (is) a collection of honorable, but still primitive legends which are nevertheless pretty childish*'.

While the scientific community has great respect for Professor Einstein as a scientist, his statement that the Bible is full of '*primitive legends*' can be proved to be false. The more we apply the principles of modern science to the Bible, the more we can confirm its Divine authorship and accuracy. What we often discover is that the information God reveals in the Bible is far greater than the scientific understanding of men at the time of writing. This confirms the Bible's Divine origin. The so-called contradictions which are sometimes pointed out by critics of the Bible, are usually due to problems with translation from the original languages of the Bible.

WORSHIP OF THE LIGHTS IN THE NIGHT SKY

In ancient times, most people believed that their gods controlled the day-to-day affairs of men. In those days, life, religion and science were not separate but bound by mystical beliefs. Above all else, the lights in the night sky – the sun, the moon, the planets and the constellations, appeared to be set over the people on the earth and to mark and influence important human events. On earth, the wind, the seasons, the unexpected behavior of animals and sometimes violent storms and earthquakes, were signs that might help predict victories in battle or were omens of impending catastrophes.

If the Bible is nothing more than the thinking of men in ancient times, then we should find that similar beliefs are recorded there. Again, we find the opposite – the Old Testament teaches that God is one and beside Him is no other. The prophet Isaiah wrote these words, some 2,800 years ago:

'Who has declared this from ancient time? Who has told it

from that time? Have not I, the LORD? And there is no other God besides Me, A just God and a Savior; There is none besides Me' [Isaiah 45.21].

The Bible teaches that worship of false gods was pointless because they were lifeless. They are described as '*gods, the work of men's hands, wood and stone, which neither see nor hear nor eat nor smell*' [Deuteronomy 4.28]. The one true God – the God of Israel, warned His people that they would be tempted to worship the gods of the heavens, according to the so-called wisdom of men of that era:

'And take heed, lest you lift your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun, the moon, and the stars, all the host of heaven, you feel driven to worship them and serve them, which the LORD your God has given to all the peoples under the whole heaven as a heritage' [Deuteronomy 4.19].

The temptation must have been very real. These days we call it '*peer-pressure*'. In Old Testament times the great majority of people were pagans –they believed in many gods. The Hebrews defiantly believed in one God who dwelt beyond the sky but was everywhere by His Spirit power. The pressure to conform to other nations' beliefs – often nations that appeared to be superior to them in every way, would have been great. But in the New Testament we read about God's view of these false beliefs:

'For since the creation of the world his invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, ... Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed beasts and creeping things' [Romans 1.20, 22,23].

We must never doubt the accuracy of the Bible message, even when it seems to be incorrect. It is always proved to be right in the end.

THE EXACT SCIENCES OF ANTIQUITY

Some Bible students may not be aware of a new revolution of understanding that is sweeping the world of Biblical analysis. In the 19th century, thousands of artifacts from ancient civilisations mentioned in the Bible – the Sumerians, the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Chaldeans, the Hittites and so on – were discovered by the archaeologists. After learning how to translate their writings in the 20th century, we now have a much clearer understanding about life in those times. As always, human ideas about what it was like have changed in the light of these new discoveries and, as always, God's view is shown to be completely accurate and unchanged.

Of particular interest are the discoveries of observations of the skies by ancient astronomers. It is perhaps one of the most exciting finds of our times. Scientists often refer to the observations and calculations of the ancient priests as the '*exact sciences of antiquity*' because they can be examined and checked for accuracy using precise, modern methods known and used by scientists today.

What have they found? The Biblical record of when events occurred not only **exceeds** the accuracy of our previous expectations, it also **exceeds** the accuracy of the scientific skills of men in those days! It appears that God has waited – with patience greater than man can conceive – until we in our modern era can finally comprehend how accurate God's Holy Word was all along!

Go outside at night and look up at the evening sky. You will find that the moon and the planets of our solar system trace out an arc in the sky that contains many stars. Ancient people grouped many of these stars into constellations. Year after year, they found that the constellations appeared in the east just before sunrise and disappeared in the west just before sunset at the same season of the year. Their

observations would often describe the intersection of a constellation with a particular phase of the moon. Astronomers call this a ‘*conjunction*’.

For example, in the summertime, the ancient Egyptians would watch for the full moon to appear in the constellation we call Aquarius. The constellation contains two bright stars named Sadalmelik and Sadalsuud. They believed that these two stars formed the right and left shoulders of their god Hapi, the water-bearer. Hapi is the ancient Egyptian name for the River Nile. They created a myth that when the full moon (also an Egyptian god) appeared with Hapi, the Nile would overflow its banks, flooding the surrounding land with nutrients to grow their crops. Virtually everyone in Egypt would believe this myth. But the Hebrews were told by the one true God that this was a false-god worship. Even though the Bible seemed to be wrong according to Egyptian ideas, it was right!

BIBLICAL CHRONOLOGY

Until the mid-19th century, very little was known about how calendars were kept in Old Testament times – from the 4th millennium BC to the 3rd century BC. It appeared that the Bible recorded events that disagreed with other historical records. It also seemed the Bible was only approximately right in the chronology of events it recorded. The Bible was regarded as being unreliable, riddled with errors. But the Bible’s critics were **completely wrong!**

Bible chronologists can determine the dates of events from this same period by the record of the year of a king’s reign. For example we read these words concerning king Asa: *‘In the thirty-eighth year of Asa king of Judah, Ahab the son of Omri became king over Israel; and Ahab the son of Omri reigned over Israel in Samaria twenty-two years’*[1 Kings 16.29]. By relating a regnal year of one king – the 38th regnal year of king Asa, Ahab’s reign can be chronologically fixed. It

is an excellent way of dating events because there were strict rules for the dating of king's reigns.

The Bible never records the reigns of kings and pharaohs outside of Israel and Judah with one exception, beginning in 605 BC, it records the reigns of the Babylonian kings. For example the prophet Jeremiah received a Divine message:

‘The word that came to Jeremiah concerning all the people of Judah, in the fourth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah (which was the first year of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon)’ [*Jeremiah 25.1*].

During this period, many events are recorded to ‘one-day’ accuracy:

‘Now it came to pass in the ninth year of his (Zedekiah’s) reign, in the tenth month, on the tenth day of the month, that Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and all his army came against Jerusalem and encamped against it; and they built a siege wall against it all around’ [*Jeremiah 52.4*].

We never read of the regnal years of Hittite, Amorite, Philistine, Egyptian and Assyrian rulers – only Babylonian rulers. Why did God record this? Here is the surprising answer: it was done for you and me! God can see events far into the future as if they are in the present. He knew this information was going to be used by our 21st century scientists to allow us to create precise dating records of these events.

ASTRONOMICAL DIARIES

Here’s how it works. The ancient Mesopotamian people recorded detailed descriptions of the positions in the skies of their gods – the sun, moon planets and constellations. In the 7th century BC and earlier, they created calendars from their observations and rules for keeping the calendars. Over the centuries, most of this knowledge was lost. Beginning in the 19th and into the 20th century, European

Assyriologists translated hundreds of clay cuneiform tablets that described how the Mesopotamians kept their calendar.

Frequently they were recorded in tablets called '*astronomical diaries*'. The diaries are observations of the positions of the sun, moon, planets and constellations during the reign of the Babylonian kings. By using modern astronomical methods we can precisely model the position of these astronomical observations. We can assign a Babylonian king's reign to a particular day in our calendar and, in some cases, even record a particular event to the minute. This means we can exceed the dating precision of the Babylonians and, in turn, date Biblical events with very high precision.



Babylonian cuneiform tablet recording the 'astronomical diary' for the 37th year of Nebuchadnezzar.

This is why God moved men to record these events in the way they did. There is no way that any person could predict that men in a future age could look back at these Babylonian records to date the Bible precisely. Modern analysis has not only shown the high accuracy of the Bible's record of historical events, in some cases it is the only way that this period can be dated at all.

THE ANCIENT 360 DAY YEAR

There remains a great mystery concerning the dates in the Bible and, once again, the Bible is accused of being approximate and incorrect. The Old Testament record of the Torah (sometimes called the law of Moses) describes times throughout the year to keep festivals that cannot be kept if we were to apply our modern calendar of 365 $\frac{1}{4}$ days per year and about 29 $\frac{1}{2}$ days per month. The Bible's account of the great flood recorded in the book of Genesis, adopts the rules of the

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ancient Babylonian ‘schematic’ year – 360 days per year or 12 months of 30 days each. This year is described by some scientists as ‘approximate’ and was used by the Sumerians and Babylonians as part of their false-god worship.

Nevertheless, an Assyriologist from the University of Ghent reported in a scientific paper in 2004 that not a single record had been discovered in Mesopotamia prior to the 8th century BC to demonstrate anything other than a 360 day year. In fact, ancient people of all countries – the Mayans, Chinese, Romans, Egyptians, Persians and so on – all kept a calendar that had 360 days per year (see Editor’s note below).

READ THE BIBLE FOR YOURSELF!

Most importantly, don’t be misled by those who seek to undermine God’s Word – read the Bible for yourself! We have shown just a few of the hidden treasures in its powerful words. Though it was written thousands of years ago, it has a message relevant to you today. God has designed His Holy Word to be perfect for your life wherever you are and whatever you are doing. We recall the wise counsel of the apostle Paul to the young man Timothy:

‘the holy Scriptures...are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. 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 complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.’

[2Timothy 3.15-17]

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Editor’s Note: If you would like to read more about this fascinating subject, Dale Wong has written a book entitled, ‘*The Ancient 360 Day Year*’ which can be purchased from Amazon Books.

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