

ENCOUNTERS AT THE CROSS

AND BONUS BOOK – BLESSED ASSURANCE!

BRIAN JOHNSTON

Copyright © 2013 HAYES PRESS

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form, without the written permission of Hayes Press.

Published by:

HAYES PRESS CHRISTIAN PUBLISHERS

The Barn, Flaxlands

Royal Wootton Bassett

Swindon, SN4 8DY

United Kingdom

www.hayespress.org

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the HOLY BIBLE, the New King James Version® (NKJV®). Copyright © 1982 Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Scriptures marked NIV are from New International Version®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide. Scriptures marked NASBB are from the New American Standard Bible®, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973,

1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. (www.Lockman.org)

CHAPTER 1: PONTIUS PILATE – UNDER PRESSURE

I'm sure the first time Pontius Pilate met Jesus was when Jesus was marched in before him, bound and jostled by the Jewish religious authorities. They were jealous of Jesus and his popular following, but required the assistance of the Roman occupying power to rid themselves of him.

“Now Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor questioned Him, saying, “Are You the King of the Jews?” And Jesus said to him, “It is as you say.” And while He was being accused by the chief priests and elders, He did not answer. Then Pilate said to Him, “Do You not hear how many things they testify against You?” And He did not answer him with regard to even a single charge, so the governor was quite amazed. Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to release for the people any one prisoner whom they wanted.

At that time they were holding a notorious prisoner, called Barabbas. So when the people gathered together, Pilate said to them, “Whom do you want me to release for you? Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?” For he knew that because of envy they had handed Him over. While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent him a message, saying, “Have nothing to do with that righteous Man; for last night I suffered greatly in a dream because of Him.” But the chief priests and the

elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to put Jesus to death.” (Matthew 27:11-20)

You didn't make it as high up in politics as to become an influential Roman governor without becoming a shrewd judge of character. Pilate quickly sized up the situation. He saw through Jesus' accusers pretty quickly: their motive was clearly envy. But Jesus intrigued him. Who was this man whom they called the King of the Jews? Obviously, that title itself fuelled the envy of the Jewish religious leaders for whom Pilate had no great love. But, wow, they really did hate this prisoner! Pilate confessed a few times on examination that he could find no fault with him; and yet, when he gave them the choice, the leaders persuaded the people to prefer the release of a murderer. Pilate found that a pity. It would have been a politically convenient way of sidestepping this awkward problem – now made all the more awkward since his wife had sent her message about how she'd dreamt about this righteous man. That added weight to Pilate's own conscience regarding the innocence of this serene individual, who appeared quite unperturbed by the vicious accusations which were being spat against him. This case was unusual, of that there was no doubt.

We've read from Matthew's Gospel, and it's worth adding more information of this intriguing encounter from John's Gospel. I've called it intriguing because on the one hand, Pilate represents the supreme power on earth at the time: the power of the Roman Empire; while Jesus, the prisoner in the dock, has earlier claimed in no uncertain terms to the leaders of the Jewish religion that they'll see all God's power vested in him – which was why they accused him of making himself out to be the Son of God (Mark 14:62). To them, this was the capital offence, the greatest blas-

phemy. So Pilate now tries to drill down to establish the facts in his cross-examination.

“Therefore Pilate entered again into the Praetorium, and summoned Jesus and said to Him, “Are You the King of the Jews?” Jesus answered, “Are you saying this on your own initiative, or did others tell you about Me?”

Pilate answered, “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chiefpriests delivered You to me; what have You done?”

Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm.”

Therefore Pilate said to Him, “So You are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say correctly that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice.”

Pilate said to Him, “What is truth?” And when he had said this, he went out again to the Jews and said to them, “I find no guilt in Him.” (John 18:33-38)

(This was a statement Pilate repeated at least twice: ‘I find no guilt in him.’)

The Jews answered him, "We have a law, and by that law He ought to die because He made Himself out to be the Son of God."

Therefore when Pilate heard this statement, he was even more afraid; and he entered into the Praetorium again and said to Jesus, "Where are You from?" But Jesus gave him no answer. So Pilate said to Him, "You do not speak to me? Do You not know that I have authority to release You, and I have authority to crucify You?"

Jesus answered, "You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above; for this reason he who delivered Me to you has the greater sin."

As a result of this Pilate made efforts to release Him, but the Jews cried out saying, "If you release this Man, you are no friend of Caesar; everyone who makes himself out to be a king opposes Caesar." Therefore when Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus out, and sat down on the judgment seat at a place called The Pavement, but in Hebrew, Gabbatha.

*Now it was the day of preparation for the Passover; it was about the sixth hour. And he *said to the Jews, "Behold, your King!"*

*So they cried out, "Away with Him, away with Him, crucify Him!" Pilate *said to them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but*

Caesar." So he then handed Him over to them to be crucified. (John 19:7-16)

Do you see what's happened? Pilate has become the man on trial! He says repeatedly that he finds no guilt in Jesus. He knows justice demands that he should release him – from the beginning he's seen through the prosecution case: it's all about envy. His wife's words have stabbed at his conscience – how did she describe this man: 'righteous' wasn't it? Yes, that's what he thinks as well: he can find no guilt in him. But now the Jewish leaders have raised the stakes with their talk of this man claiming to be God's Son.

Pilate's impressed with the demeanour of the prisoner and perhaps in his superstitious mind he keeps turning over that possibility. Then Jesus graciously says that Caiaphas the Jewish high priest is much guiltier in all this than Pilate. At this, Pilate redoubles his efforts to release Jesus. But then the Jews play their trump card. Pilate, if you let this man go, you're not a friend of Caesar. Losing the friendship of Caesar would spell the end of his political ambitions. He knows it's wrong, but Pilate is the weak one here, not the prisoner. He doesn't have the strength of his convictions. He buckles, and caves in to their demands. He bows to pressure.

For the sake of certain friendships it seems he'll go against his conscience, against what he's determined to be the correct course of action. Pilate is like a pawn moved around by the tactics of the Jews and the threat of Caesar's ill-will. Pilate sacrificed the truth that day. In fact, he shows contempt for truth: 'what is truth?' he asks Christ. His years in politics have made him cynical. In the

end he chooses to act against his better judgement, and to sacrifice truth and justice: this righteous man was expendable if saving his own political career was on the line. Above all else, he had to keep this unruly Jewish province quiet or he really would lose his reputation and job.

I want to quote to you from an old sermon in which the preacher used his imagination to set the scene for us as though it were the reflection of Pontius Pilate sometime afterwards. Remember, what follows are only imagined to be the words and thoughts of Pontius Pilate.

‘It suddenly closed in on me, Gaius, the impact of how trapped I was. The proud arm of Rome with all its boast of justice was to be but a dirty dagger in the pudgy hands of the priests. I was waiting in the room ... I use for court, officially enthroned with cloak and guard, when they let this Jesus in. Well, Gaius, don't smile at this as you value your jaw, but I've had no peace since the day he walked into my judgement hall. It's been years, Gaius, but those scenes I'll read from the back of my eyelids every night. You've seen Caesar, haven't you? When he was young, inspecting the legion, his arrogant manner was child-like compared to the manner of the Nazarene.

He didn't have to strut, you see. He walked towards my throne, arms bound, with a strident mastery - this Jesus did - and a kind of a control that by its very audacity silenced the room for an instant, and left me trembling with an insane desire to stand up and salute. The clerk began reading the absurd list of charges, the priestly delegations punctuating these with the palm rubbings, the beard strokings, the eye rollings, and the pious gutturals - by

now which I had learned to ignore, but I more felt it, Gaius, than heard it. I questioned him mechanically and he answered very little. But what he said and the way he said it – it was as if his level gaze had pulled up my naked soul right up into my eyes and was probing me there and a voice kept saying in my ears "Why, you're on trial Pilate!"...'

The sermon continues, but we'll leave it there as we draw to a close. This world's verdict stands recorded, intertwined with Pilate's personal response to Christ. Will yours be the same? Will the world also succeed in squeezing you into its mould – influenced by your friends and ambitions? Your judgement of Christ will be God's judgement of you – don't forget that. Christianity is marginalised in much of the world today, and it's becoming worse in many places where Christians are deprived of basic justice, as was their master 2,000 years ago. And still God doesn't intervene, just as Christ stood silently before Pilate. But all history will one day wind up at the feet of the same Christ. As Pilate, in reality was the one on trial, so will all humanity answer to Jesus Christ, the prisoner who stood in the dock that day before Pilate.

"We look back upon history, and what do we see? Empires rising and falling, revolutions and counterrevolutions, wealth accumulated and wealth disbursed." These are the words of Malcolm Muggeridge, who went on to say: "I've heard a crazed, cracked Austrian (Hitler) announce to the world the establishment of a Reich that would last a thousand years. I have seen an Italian clown (Mussolini) say he was going to stop and restart the calendar with his own ascension to power. I've heard a murderous Georgian brigand in the Kremlin (Stalin), acclaimed by the in-

tellectual elite of the world as being wiser than Solomon. I have seen America wealthier and, in terms of military weaponry, more powerful than the rest of the world put together—so that had the American people so desired, they could have outdone a Caesar, or an Alexander in the range and scale of their conquests. All in one lifetime, all in one lifetime, all gone! Gone with the wind!

Hitler and Mussolini dead, remembered only in infamy. Stalin a forbidden name in the regime he helped found and dominate for some three decades. All in one lifetime, all in one lifetime, all gone! Gone with the wind! Behind the debris of these solemn supermen ...there stands the gigantic figure of One: because of whom, by whom, in whom, and through whom alone, mankind may still have peace - the person of Jesus Christ.”

Unlike Pilate, are you on the side of truth?

CHAPTER 2: SIMON OF CYRENE - UNDER OBLIGATION

Telemachus was a monk who, according to the religious historian Theodoret, tried to stop a gladiator fight in a Roman amphitheatre, and was stoned to death by the crowd. The Christian Emperor Honorius was so impressed by the monk's martyrdom that it spurred him to issue an edict banning gladiator fights. The last known gladiator fight in Rome was on the first of January in 404 AD, so this tends to be given as the date of Telemachus' martyrdom. He's described as a reclusive country boy who was stunned and repulsed by what he found in the city. Now we are going to meet another person who came in from the country into a city and once again into the history books: but it's not Rome this time; it's Jerusalem – and it's Passover-time. For the Jew, at Passover time, all roads led to Jerusalem.

To travel to Jerusalem for Passover was the desire of every Jew who lived outside of Judea. And their dedication was evidenced by the distance they travelled to get there. From the city of Cyrene, an ancient Greek colony located on the north-eastern coast of present-day Libya, where a large community of Jews lived, it was a distance of nearly 900 miles to Jerusalem. The journey from Cyrene to Jerusalem took a month or more, and was potentially dangerous. Jews who travelled that kind of distance took a big risk due to the unpredictable weather conditions, desert marauders, wild animals and other perilous circumstances. So for Simon of Cyrene, seeing the city walls coming into view may have brought with it a tangible sense of relief. He

may have heard of Jesus a time or two. With Cyrene located near the coastline, ships of merchants often brought there tales from distant lands. What may have intrigued Simon most was the chance that Jesus was the promised Messiah.

But there were also many wealthy foreign Jews who had made their residence at Jerusalem. Some may have been temporary visitors for a couple of months around Passover time; others living there more or less permanently, as the word might rather suggest which Luke uses when he says:

“... there were Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men from every nation under heaven ... Parthians and Medes and Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya around Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes.” (Acts 2:5, 9-10)

So Simon may not have been a pilgrim after all, but a semi-permanent resident. His name indicates that he was a Jew, and in fact, we know from the Bible that there was even a synagogue of Cyrenian Jews at Jerusalem at that time – something which further supports the idea that there was a resident community of Jews from Cyrene at Jerusalem then. As we have said, Cyrene was situated in modern-day Libya, on the northern coast of the African continent. Settled by the Greeks in 630 B.C., it later gained a significant Jewish population. Cyrene was the capital of a Roman district (Cyrenaica) at the time of Jesus’ crucifixion.

By then, it was home to a large number of Greek-speaking, or so-called Hellenistic, Jews. Many Jews from Cyrene had returned to their native Israel and were part of a community in Jerusalem called the Synagogue of the Freedmen comprising Jews from many other provinces including Alexandria (Egypt), Cilicia and Asia. Luke tells us ... some men from what was called the Synagogue of the Freedmen, including both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and argued with Stephen [that's the same Stephen who became the first Christian martyr]. (Acts 6:9)

So, although Simon was a native of Cyrene, he might very well have been living in Jerusalem at this time. In fact, some of these Cyrenian Jews were later converted to faith in Christ; for among those who were scattered abroad after the death of Stephen, were some originally from Cyrene:

“... who were scattered because of the persecution that occurred in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus.” (Acts 11:19-20)

But depending on whether he was coming from far or near that day, upon arriving in Jerusalem, Simon may have been confused to see the city in an uproar. Angry mobs crowded the streets, some shouting, others weeping bitterly. Perhaps someone told Simon that Jesus was going to be crucified. Making his way

through the crowds, he wanted to catch a glimpse of the man that the people were now strangely so eager to kill.

He was still trying to make sense of the outrage when a Roman soldier pulled him from the crowd, and ordered him to carry the cross for Jesus. So Simon of Cyrene, a city in North Africa, in Libya, populated with many Jews, was forced to carry the cross (actually the crossbeam) when Jesus could no longer carry it himself, being weak from the beatings he'd received. When Simon saw Jesus, he was by this time barely able to stand, let alone able to bear the weight of his own cross. It didn't make sense to Simon. If this was the Messiah, it wasn't supposed to end like this.

With little choice, Simon swallowed his pride, took up the cross, and followed Jesus, as it says: When they led Him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, coming in from the country, and placed on him the cross to carry behind Jesus (Luke 23:26). I wonder how Simon felt about this? It's even possible that this man, Simon, was already a follower of Christ – and this might be one reason why they laid hold on him, and obliged him to bear the cross of Christ. The soldiers compelled him to bear his cross; which the soldiers did, not out of good will to Jesus, but afraid that through his weakness, Jesus might die even before he got to the place of execution. Simon might've been unwilling to do this, partly because it was scandalous and shameful; and partly, because if he was a follower of Jesus, he didn't want to be in any way an accessory to Jesus' death: but in the end he had no choice.

Mark, uncharacteristically, adds a little more information about this Simon from Cyrene in his gospel – he tells us more than the other Gospel writers at least. He records, "*They pressed into service a passer-by coming from the country, Simon of Cyrene (the father of Alexander and Rufus), to bear His cross*" (Mark 15:21). Interesting that Mark should mention that Simon had two sons, and name them, to the people he was writing. Mark initially directed his gospel account to those living in Rome. So why would Mark mention the sons of Simon by name in a document he was sending to people in a far-away city?

Well, one reason could be that those in Rome knew either Alexander or Rufus or both. In fact, when Paul writes to the Romans, he mentions someone called Rufus by name in his greetings at the end of the letter: Greet Rufus, a choice man in the Lord, also his mother and mine. (Romans 16:13). If the Rufus mentioned by Paul is the son of Simon of Cyrene, then it would certainly make sense for Mark to mention him by name as he wrote his gospel and sent it to Rome. Could there be any other reason to mention Simon's sons by name? So, we have – very likely - one of Simon's sons, half a generation later, belonging to the Church of God at Rome.

I wonder how many times he'd heard his father tell the story of the day the Roman soldiers conscripted him into service on the road leading out of Jerusalem? And I wonder how many times Rufus himself was later asked by those at Rome about the event in which his father had played a role. So Simon was a cross-bearer after Jesus, and there's circumstantial evidence that he became – even if he wasn't already – a follower of Jesus. There's a sense

in which all who follow Christ are to be cross-bearers: the difference being it's our own cross which Jesus invites us to take up.

Jesus said: *"If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me."*
(Luke 9:23)

We often hear people today talking about the cross they have to bear. But, usually what they mean is a million miles removed from what the Lord meant. They might be talking about coping with their arthritis or some other chronic complaint or circumstance, but the Lord was defining for us true discipleship when He said, *"If any man would come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me"*. Christ's challenge is threefold, requiring a conscious decision on our part, then self-denial and finally total commitment. The stakes are so high and yet the Lord leaves it to us: *"if any man would ..."*

What powerful imagery the Lord uses, for the man who picked up a cross was no longer living for this world – let's not lose sight of that – he no longer had any interest in it. And so, equally, the committed Christian selflessly loses his life in this world for Christ's sake. Real commitment is the measure of real faith. The faith of the early disciples was revolutionizing; transforming, moulding their entire lives for the Master. We ought to live in the midst of secular society in a manner consistent with the fact that the truth of God possesses our hearts - and with our lives, and not merely our words, expressing that Jesus is real.

Simon carried the cross 'after Jesus' – even if unwillingly at first. Will we 'come after him' too? He carried our cross in the sense

that his death was our death; but now we must carry our own, each day reckoning it to be a fact that we've been crucified with Christ from God's perspective (Romans 6:6). May our example of cross-carrying shape the lives of our children as Simon's appears to have done.

When I visited Christians in India, I met a young lad from a different religious background who had come to Christ. His family didn't share his new faith. And so, when his father died he was asked to carry the torch and ignite his father's funeral pyre. Politely, he announced to his family that he could not comply with their wish. He could not carry such a torch because he was already carrying a cross for Jesus.

The Lord expects, although without commanding it here, that we "come after" him, to walk in the "narrow" way with himself, in true freedom enjoying life in all its fullness. Surely with sadness, in view of his supreme sacrifice, the Lord said that few (believers) are willing so to do. But there was one young Indian Christian whose self-denying example I'll never forget.

CHAPTER 3: BARABBAS - UNDER CONVICTION

The story is told of two brothers who were notorious gang members. When one died, the other went to a pastor and asked if he would take his brother's funeral. He offered the pastor a great deal of money for doing so - upon one condition: that at some point in his sermon the pastor would speak of this rogue as a saint. The pastor said he felt he could just about manage that. When the day came: the pastor waxed eloquent about the vile character of the deceased. This man, he said, was a rotter to the core of his being, capable of - and indeed guilty of - the most horrific crimes - but compared to his brother - he was a saint! He had in that ingenious way fulfilled the condition and upheld his integrity.

But I'm thinking now of a story involving three gangsters. Perhaps, I need to be more careful. I don't know for sure that these three men were all members of the same gang as such. What I do know is that they were all in the same place at the same time and all charged with the same type of offences - which were insurrection, robbery and murder.

They were all sentenced to death, but one of them rather unexpectedly had his sentence quashed. This came about because there was a local custom at that particular time and place which was that one prisoner - any one of the prisoners - should be set free at that time of year. It was a kind of jail-house lottery and the prize was freedom for one prisoner. Exactly who that would be was settled by a public vote.

Now, sometimes certain prisoners acquire a greater degree of notoriety than others; and some even elicit sympathy because some aspect of their crime captures the public imagination.

This happened in the United Kingdom some time back with a man called Ronnie Biggs. He was one of a gang known as the Great Train Robbers. The Great Train Robbery is the name given to an armed raid on a Mail train in which millions of British pounds were stolen. This crime was committed on 8 August 1963 in Buckinghamshire, England. The bulk of the stolen money was never recovered. Three robbers were never found, and two convicted robbers escaped. One of them was Ronnie Biggs. His part in the crime was relatively small, and his daring escape from prison in 1965 was to bring him a kind of cult following. He lived as a fugitive for 36 years and took part in various publicity stunts while in exile. Then, in 2001, he voluntarily returned to the United Kingdom and spent several years in prison, where his health rapidly declined. On 6 August 2009, Biggs was released from prison on compassionate grounds.

Just as British people know the name of Ronnie Biggs, the people living in Jerusalem 2,000 years ago knew the name of Barabbas. He'd been a wanted man, and he belonged behind bars. Surely the public could rest more safely in their beds now that he was off their streets. So how was it that they ended up voting for his release? That's the question we're going to look at now by reading from Matthew's Gospel, chapter 27.

“Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to release for the people any one prisoner whom they wanted. At that time they were holding a notorious prisoner, called

Barabbas. So when the people gathered together, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you? Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?" For he knew that because of envy they had handed Him over... But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to put Jesus to death.

*But the governor said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And they said, "Barabbas." Pilate said to them, "Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" They all said, "Crucify Him!" And he said, "Why, what evil has He done?" But they kept shouting all the more, saying, "Crucify Him!" ... Then he released Barabbas for them; but after having Jesus scourged, he handed Him over to be crucified."
(Matthew 27:15-26)*

So that's how the choice of Barabbas was made that day. He totally deserved to die, but he walked free that day, and perhaps he himself couldn't figure out why? Did he spare a thought for his companions in crime? We'll read from Luke's Gospel in just a moment, but I want you to think about this, between Barabbas and his two fellow-prisoners who actually were put to death, which of the three of them found real freedom that day? Here's what Luke says:

"Two others also, who were criminals, were being led away to be put to death with Him. [that is with Jesus] When they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified Him and the criminals, one on the right and the other on the left. But Jesus was saying, "Father, for-

give them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots, dividing up His garments among themselves. And the people stood by, looking on. And even the rulers were sneering at Him, saying, "He saved others; let Him save Himself if this is the Christ of God, His Chosen One." The soldiers also mocked Him, coming up to Him, offering Him sour wine, and saying, "If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself!"

Now there was also an inscription above Him, "THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS." One of the criminals who were hanged there was hurling abuse at Him, saying, "Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!" But the other answered, and rebuking him said, "Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed are suffering justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." And he was saying, "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!" And He said to him, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise." (Luke 23:32-43)

So which of the three gangsters found real freedom that day? Was it Barabbas who walked free? Or was it the believing thief who died next to Jesus but with Jesus' words ringing in his ears: "Today you shall be with Me in Paradise"? Surely, it was the dying thief who found real forgiveness in Christ for all his sins. Notice, it was not his good life that saved him from the judgement to come. But he had repented of his evil ways, confessed that he was only getting what he deserved. Such thinking as he expressed in

his dying hours represented a sea-change in his thinking. Earlier, he'd joined in with the other thief in mocking Jesus.

But as his life ebbed away, and sobered by the suffocating pain, he found himself challenged by the behaviour of the innocent victim who hung between himself and his gangster friend. What a study in contrasts between his friend with all his cursing and cries for vengeance and this man, this stranger, with the even stranger behaviour. He was in agony too, just like they were, but instead of cursing he prayed for those who abused him. Could you believe it? He did eventually. His thinking changed, and he repented.

Everything about the man on the middle cross made him feel so ashamed about all his life. He changed his tune, and even called on his former friend to quit mocking Jesus. Those words written above Jesus head arrested his attention and focused his thoughts now. What did they say? 'This is Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.' A king, dying a criminal's death? But his dignified behaviour was every bit royal. He felt now that he truly did believe in this Jesus. Hadn't he heard rumours about this same miracle-worker who had created quite some stir by challenging the religious authorities. The rebel in him had appreciated that last part.

Somehow, by the help of God's Spirit, it began to make sense, Jesus was truly a king. If not now, then at least afterwards. Afterwards, yes, where would he spend eternity? He didn't deserve God's heaven. Unless, unless, even now, Jesus could – no would – help him. Much more softly now, and between painful gasping breaths, he summoned up the energy to call out to Jesus. He believed with all his heart that Jesus was a king, and so his kingdom

must be yet to come. 'Remember me, he said, when you come in your kingdom.' That was the vision the chief priests had rejected, the very idea of Jesus coming seated in power on the cloud of heaven was sheer blasphemy to them. But now to this dying thief, whom the priests would have classed as scum, it was real, truly believable.

He'd never believed in anything more surely than this. But was it all too late? How reassuring Jesus' words must have sounded in the dying thief's ear. 'Today you will be with Me in Paradise.' Totally undeserved, all of God's extravagant grace, all paid for on the centre cross.

How was that thief saved? By God's grace, as we all must be. He could do nothing to save himself, but he was saved, for we must believe Christ's words that he went immediately upon his death to the place of the blessed. If we disregard God's grace, it'll tend to be either because we think we're too good to need saving (like the chief priests), or too bad to be saved at all (perhaps like the other thief). Well, Barabbas was free to live another day, but the nameless dying, believing thief was free to live for ever in the Lord's presence. How strange, but how wonderful, that their paths should meet at the cross.

CHAPTER 4: JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA - UNDER COVER

John Stott said it well when he said: 'I could never myself believe in God if it were not for the cross. It is the cross that gives God his credibility. The only God I believe in is the one Nietzsche (the nineteenth-century German philosopher) ridiculed as 'God on the cross'. In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it?

In the course of my travels I have entered a number of Buddhist temples in different Asian countries. I have stood respectfully before a statue of the Buddha, his legs crossed, arms folded, eyes closed, the ghost of a smile playing round his mouth, serene and silent, a remote look on his face, detached from the agonies of the world. But each time after a while I have had to turn away. And in my imagination I have turned instead to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn-pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in God-forsaken darkness.

The crucified one is the God for me! He laid aside his immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh and blood, tears and death. He suffered for us, dying in our place in order that we might be forgiven. Our sufferings become more manageable in the light of his. There is still a question-mark against human suffering, but over it we boldly stamp another mark, the cross, which symbolizes divine suffering."

If it took the cross to confirm to John Stott the existence of God, it certainly took the cross to awaken and deepen conviction in the heart of the man we meet at the cross in this chapter. His name is Joseph, and we distinguish him from other Josephs in the Bible by referring to him as Joseph of Arimathea. That place, Arimathea, is a place whose locality is not known with any certainty, but it probably lay to the Northwest of Jerusalem.

The message which Jesus had brought from God and announced to the crowds is described as ‘good news for the poor.’ At one time at least, Jesus had made comment to his disciples that it was hard for rich people to receive his message. But with God it’s possible, and this man, Joseph, proves it for he was a “rich man” (Matthew 27:57).

Later, when the Apostle Paul was writing his first Bible letter to the early Christians at Corinth, he said that not many of them were ‘noble’ (1 Corinthians 1:26). It tended to be the common people who heard Jesus gladly. Jesus’ appeal was widespread among the disenfranchised in those early days. But it was not exclusively among the common folks that Christianity took root. Joseph, as well as being rich, is also described as influential, for he was ‘a councillor of honorable estate’, being a member of the Jewish ruling Council, the one known as the Sanhedrin (Mark 15:43; Luke 23:50).

In this book, based around people whom Jesus met at the cross, we ourselves are meeting some of the kind of people you wouldn’t want to meet on a dark night when you are alone – people like the thief who was crucified next to Jesus. His encounter with Jesus has shown us that the redeeming message of

Christianity is also for bad people. But it doesn't exclude the good. The person we are currently studying shows to us that they need it every bit as much. Yes, Joseph is described as "*a good and righteous man ...*"

More than that, we're told in the Bible that he was looking for the kingdom of God (Luke 23:50; Mark 15:43). That's a very meaningful comment about Joseph, and we probably should take the time to consider it. Our Lord said at the commencement of His ministry, '*I must preach the kingdom of God ... for I was sent for this purpose*' (Luke 4:43,44). With the eye of faith, godly Israelites at the time of our Lord's First Advent, looked ahead towards this time of Messiah's earthly rule. Typical among them was this man, Joseph: a man from Arimathea, a city of the Jews, who was waiting for the kingdom of God (Luke 23:50-52).

Anticipation, such as this felt by Joseph, came from reading prophecies like the Old Testament prophet Daniel's – who had written that he saw that: One like a Son of Man was coming, and He came up to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him. And to Him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations and men of every language might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed ... but the saints of the Highest One will receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever, for all ages to come (Daniel 7:13-18). Jesus, on arriving on the public stage, had only encouraged this expectation by referring to himself repeatedly as the Son of Man.

Yes, for someone as interested in God's kingdom as Joseph, his ears would have pricked up when he heard – or heard it reported – that Jesus was preaching about the kingdom as having arrived already – and was referring to himself as the Son of Man. Then again, Jesus also sometimes said things like, 'Behold the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they put forth leaves, you see it and know for yourselves that summer is now near. So you also, when you see these things happening, recognize that the kingdom of God is near' (Luke 21:29-31). If you listened carefully to Jesus, it was as if he was saying that God's kingdom was the already here - but also not yet here kingdom!

Even after Joseph disappears from off the pages of our Bibles, Jesus' disciples, it seems, still continued to express a measure of confusion on this topic – certainly until after Christ's post-resurrection ministry – and at least until the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:3,6,8). Jesus explained at that time, 2,000 years ago, that God's kingdom would be spiritual in nature, totally dependent on the arrival of the Holy Spirit, and would not then or even now have the usual character of a visible kingdom. But he did also refer to a time – and it's still future – when the people of Israel will be restored to the place God originally intended for them at the head of all the nations of earth, and all true Gentile believers will share with them in this ultimate and finally visible expression of God's earthly kingdom. For such a time as this Joseph waited. He could not be expected to know it would not be seen in his lifetime.

One of the delightful descriptions of this man, Joseph of Arimathea, is that he "*himself was Jesus' disciple*" (Mat. 27:57; John 19:38). He kept his discipleship secret "*for fear of the Jews*" (John

19:38), but even so, he was committed to the cause of Christ in that he'd not consented to the plan of the Jewish leaders to kill Jesus – perhaps by absenting himself from the meeting which had decided Jesus should die (compare Luke 23:51; Mark 14:64).

If there's any hint of criticism there, it's perhaps only a hint. Joseph was possibly treading a fine line between loyalty to the position he held within the Council of the elders of his people on the one hand, and yet not betraying his conscience on the other. Might his have been a strategic decision not to go public with his faith initially? We'll find shortly that God would use Joseph and his connections to safeguard our Lord's body and bring Old Testament verses to fulfilment.

We can also perhaps reflect on secret disciples – and even entire groups of believers today who live 'underground' – in the sense that they don't advertise their allegiance to Jesus. There are often solid reasons for this in some harsh and hostile regimes in different parts of the world today.

The test is, when a public declaration of faith needs to be made, will we make it? Joseph of Arimathea stepped up to the plate when the time came. The Bible says of him: this man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus (Luke 23:50-52). Some sources outside the Bible suggest Joseph was a friend of Pilate. There's nothing in the Bible itself to suggest that. In any case, it took courage to make the particular request he did. On the evening after the crucifixion he went "boldly" to Pilate and begged the body of Jesus. This was his time, and he did what he was in a unique position to do. There's a time to be silent, and

there's a time to speak up. If there'd been any doubts among his colleagues on the Jewish Council before this as to where his sympathies lay, they would all be gone now.

I'm reminded of the story of Queen Esther in the Old Testament. She kept her identity hidden for a while. But when there was something at stake, in the hour of her people's need, and as a vital link in the outworking of God's plan through history, she acted by declaring her true colours. Not that she'd ever been faking it. She'd always lived true to her character. We should be the same. Our lifestyle and our decisions, like those of Esther and Joseph, should give a clear indication of our identity even as we sanctify Christ in our heart. And, when the situation demands it, or when the question is asked of us, we declare ourselves openly on the side of the Christ of the cross.

And there's a fine touch in that Joseph himself took down Jesus' body from the cross. With the assistance of Nicodemus he wound it in fine linen with spices and brought it to his new tomb in the garden near the place where the crucifixion had taken place. This was held to be the fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah (53:9) that Christ would be with the rich in his death.

So, it's in the death and resurrection of Jesus, that Joseph of Arimathea makes his testimony public. And isn't that what we do at our Christian believer's baptism? We identify in symbol with Jesus' death and resurrection by our immersion in water as we go public with our discipleship. It's really only in association with the cross that we find Joseph, may we be like him in this: that God will keep us near to the cross.

CHAPTER 5: THE CENTURION – UNDER AUTHORITY

The Centurion had a routine, if grim, task to perform. He'd seen many men die in the same excruciating way. By the way, our word 'excruciating' is literally 'out of the cross.' And that's very relevant because it's to the cross where Jesus Christ died in the first century AD that the centurion's duties relate. Crucifixion is probably the cruellest method of execution humans have ever invented and was reportedly adopted by the Romans from barbarians living on the margins of the empire, but it seems to have first been used in history by the Persians around or before the year 300 BC.

Well, back to the first century AD, around the year 33 AD, in fact, probably the Spring of that very same year. The centurion had received his orders that morning. He had a list of three men to be dispatched. All in a day's work for a hardened professional Roman soldier, one who'd been promoted to the rank of centurion, a career soldier.

Hardened he may have been, but we need not think of him as being necessarily hostile to matters of faith. In fact, most, if not all, of the centurions we encounter as we read the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, are all shown in a favourable light, some were even positively God-fearing. So far, the jury is out on this one, this centurion whose duty rota meant that he was in charge on the day commemorated by many ever since as Good Friday. 'Good for whom?', you might well ask. And I suppose we would have to say 'good for sinners ... if they believe in the true significance of what took place.' But let's not rush

ahead of ourselves. I don't know what the centurion had heard or thought about Jesus Christ prior to their coming together in the course of his work that day. His duty that day I expect would have required that he was in attendance at the trial which took place before Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor. Perhaps, as he watched events unfold, he realized that Pilate was cornered by the crowd. Luke, in his Gospel, chapter 23, says:

"But they [that's the crowd] were insistent, with loud voices asking that He be crucified. And their voices began to prevail. And Pilate pronounced sentence that their demand be granted ... Two others also, who were criminals, were being led away to be put to death with Him. When they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified Him and the criminals, one on the right and the other on the left. But Jesus was saying, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots, dividing up His garments among themselves." (Luke 23:23-24,32-34)

So, by now much of the centurion's active duty was done, but he couldn't leave his post. He was stationed there by the cross, supervising his men, and standing guard to ensure that none of the Galilean's followers tried to rescue him. Death by crucifixion was slow, a lingering, horrible, suffocating death. He may have known of a few cases where people had been taken down and survived. The Governor's orders were clear that day: make no mistake with this man. The Jewish religious leaders in this turbulent province could make real political trouble for Pilate. He'd decided he couldn't afford to risk that. So the centurion was

posted there until the end, to certify that death had occurred and sentence had been carried out.

I don't know how comfortable he was with that. Used to it, is perhaps a better way of putting it. Idly, he watched the men under his charge. They, too, had ways of passing the time. At this moment, they were busy gambling for Jesus' seamless coat. They were more concerned with their own private lottery than the cosmic conflict that raged on the cross above them. They gambled while Christ donated his life and freely paid the ransom for all believers. They were held in the grip of materialism while our spiritual victory was being won for us. But before we rush to condemn them, let's weigh carefully what the Holy Spirit says through the Apostle Paul as he writes to the Church of God at Philippi, he says:

"... many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things." (Philippians 3:18-19)

How chilling for any believer – and yes, those referred to here by Paul are those who professed to believe – but they are no longer living the life. How chilling for any believer to be accused of becoming an enemy of the cross because he or she is now concentrating purely on worldly possessions or is totally absorbed in the affairs of this life! Perhaps they still attend church services as a matter of routine, going through the same motions which long since had ceased to be meaningful to them. This is not an

uncommon problem, as Paul writes about it again, this time to those in the church of God at Corinth, and warns such people:

"... whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord." (1 Corinthians 11:27)

Their indifference to the sufferings of Christ as represented in the weekly remembrance symbols of bread and wine makes them sharers, Paul says, in the guilt that applies to those we've been thinking about who were so indifferent to Christ's sufferings that they sat in the shadow of the cross and gambled for his clothing. How dreadful to think of it that way! But having got back to the cross, let's read further with Luke:

"And the people stood by, looking on. And even the rulers were sneering at Him, saying, "He saved others; let Him save Himself if this is the Christ of God, His Chosen One." The soldiers also mocked Him, coming up to Him, offering Him sour wine, and saying, "If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself!" Now there was also an inscription above Him, "THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS." (Luke 23:35-38)

The centurion by this time had heard his bosses and his subordinates all mocking Jesus. Perhaps he'd even joined in with them all ridiculing the notion that the man on the centre cross was a king. But the more people joined in mocking his claim to be royalty, the more the centurion strangely felt he could believe that claim. He'd seen a lot of men die – too many perhaps – maybe he even wished he could retire from his job and be finished with it.

But he'd not seen anyone die quite like this man on the centre cross. Yes, back then when his men had put those pretend royal clothes on the prisoner - he should have stopped it really - but why waste pity on a prisoner, normally they deserved all they got – even if it was rough justice. But he'd thought it back then, and now even more so, that the crown and robe – despite what they were – they all fitted – a crown and a royal robe were truly suited to the dignity of the prisoner's bearing in those unbelievably humiliating circumstances. How ironic had been the intention of all those taunts of 'king' that day! But the centurion had finally begun to sense a deeper irony. Could it not be that the crucified man who was being ridiculed as a king that day really was worthy of that title in the greatest way imaginable! Matthew's Gospel says:

"Now from the sixth hour darkness fell upon all the land until the ninth hour ... And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit. And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth shook and the rocks were split. The tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection they entered the holy city and appeared to many. Now the centurion, and those who were with him keeping guard over Jesus, when they saw the earthquake and the things that were happening, became very frightened and said, "Truly this was the Son of God!" (Matthew 27:45,50-54)

Matthew didn't include them there, but John tells us in his Gospel (John 19:30) that at the very end, Jesus, while crying out with that loud voice Matthew speaks of, said something that in the Greek language amounts to only one word: *tetelestai*! It was probably a word the centurion, as a military man, had heard many times before. At very least, he more than likely knew through his military training that this was the word you wanted to be able to shout at the end of a hard-fought battle. It was a word related to a successful military campaign against the enemy. When a general returned from the battle-field and paraded his prisoners of war in the streets of Rome, he proclaimed his victory by shouting: "Tetelestai! Tetelestai! By this victory shout a clear statement was being made that the enemy was conquered, its power broken: this was mission accomplished!

Earlier, when the centurion had been reflecting on whether it was possible that there had been a deeper irony that day – that the ridiculed king was the real king and they had managed to get everything upside down – I suspect, he'd also begun to think about the day's supernatural happenings. Whatever had happened to the sun today? And, wait a minute, had not the ground just shook? Rumours were instant and rife about the sacred Jewish temple curtain being deliberately ripped in a way that was humanly inconceivable, not to mention those wild reports of tombs standing open and bodies appearing. And just while he'd been processing all these facts, his chief charge had then shouted out with commanding strength: "Tetelestai".

The shout, piercing the darkness, and coming from the precise location of the central cross, was recognizable to any Roman soldier. And, of course, our wondering centurion knew this was

how you declared victory. His battered, ridiculed, crucified and dying charge was announcing that his mission was accomplished. Jews and Romans had done their worst against him, but he was announcing he was undefeated. In fact he was victorious. At that moment, the centurion knew his scepticism and suspension of belief were hopeless. This was strange, weird, supernatural ... and somehow credible. He heard himself say the words: this truly was the Son of God!

I'm reminded of the dying words which have been attributed to the Roman Emperor, known as Julian the Apostate. And those dying words were: "Thou hast conquered, O Galilean" – a reference to Christ whose teachings Julian had rejected. The victim was in actual fact the victor. Has he won your heart too?

BONUS BOOK - BLESSED ASSURANCE

CHAPTER 1: THE POWER OF THE WORD

Uncertainty can be very debilitating. By contrast, once we're sure of something, the release from all our previous uncertainties can be very liberating. It's God's intention that Christians should possess certainty in the essential matters of faith. There's a word in the New Testament that has a ring of Christian confidence about it. It's one which means 'full assurance' or, in other words, 'total conviction'. In this chapter, we'll look at the first of the four places it's found in our Bibles. The apostle Paul used it in describing some of the townspeople of Thessalonica who had responded to his preaching on a visit there. By letter he later reminded them: *"Our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction"* (1 Thessalonians 1:5). And he went on in the next chapter to add: *"we thank God that when you received from us the word of God's message, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God"* (1 Thessalonians 2:13).

So what was this full assurance or full conviction that these Thessalonians had? They had been fully convinced that the message Paul had preached to them was from God: it was God's own message to their hearts. They couldn't have failed to see that was the preacher's personal conviction. The word, we read, came to them with full assurance. Paul the preacher was certainly per-

suaded that the message he'd been given to preach was a divine message. He told others that what he delivered to them was what he himself had received from the Lord. Speaking more generally on another occasion he'd asked how anyone could preach unless they'd been sent (Romans 10:15). The apostle Paul was a man on a mission. He did what he encouraged his protégé Timothy to do: to *'preach the Word'* (God's Word; 2 Timothy 4:2). Like the Old Testament prophet, Paul saw himself as the Lord's messenger in the Lord's message (Haggai 1:13).

In fact, he uses that very expression in the second letter he wrote to the new Church of God at Thessalonica. In chapter 3, he writes of "*the Lord's message*" (2 Thessalonians 3:1) which a couple of verses later he describes as the 'commands' (3:4,6,10,12,14) and also as the 'tradition' of the apostles (3:6). It's impressive to see the strength of Paul's total conviction as expressed here that the apostolic tradition - the teaching handed down by the apostles - was totally identified as being the Lord's own message. And Paul's conviction has, for us, the endorsement of the Holy Spirit as forming part of the written Word of God.

Whenever a preacher takes up God's Word, and faithfully preaches it in the Spirit's power, then we - like the Thessalonians - can be assured that we're hearing the Lord's message. And because it's the Lord's message, it must have full authority in our life. The authority of the message is really Paul's emphasis in 2 Thessalonians chapter 3. He first of all deals with the need to **spread the Word in the world** (vv.1-3). In this connection he mentions friends like those at Thessalonica who embrace the Word - who glorify it by receiving it; but then, on the other hand, Paul goes on to describe enemies who oppose the Word

when he requests prayer that he and his co-workers “*may be delivered from wicked and evil men for not everyone has (the) faith.*”

It's interesting that when Paul talks about the need to spread God's Word, he writes concerning 'the faith'. The Bible makes a difference between 'the faith' and 'faith'. The Faith is the objective body of beliefs; whereas 'faith' is the faculty of believing that body of biblical truths - of which we can be assured that it is the Lord's message. Not everyone, of course, has that blessed assurance, and so Paul clearly implies spiritual conflict when, on the one hand, he talks of 'the faithful Lord' and, on the other hand, of 'the evil one', that's Satan of course. Spreading the Word of God will inevitably bring us into the arena of battle.

In fact, the battle rages within us too, and certainly within local churches like the Church of God we read about here at Thessalonica - because the second vital need Paul emphasises in relation to the Lord's message is the need, not only to spread it to others, but also to obey it ourselves, **to obey the Word in the churches** (vv.4-15). How hypocritical, not to mention how wrong, it would be to share the commands of God's Word with others while disregarding them in our own lives at the same time!

Paul definitely emphasises our need to obey God's authoritative Word in the following section of 2 Thessalonians 3. Just count up for yourselves later how many times he uses words like 'command' and 'obey' as you read from verse 4 to verse 14. Now at this point I want to confess that previously I used to enjoy verse 5 of this chapter in isolation – as a stand-alone devotional thought. It's worthy enough as that, of course, for it's the verse that says: “*And may the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into*

the steadfastness of Christ". But I'd like us to set it firmly in the context of Second Thessalonians chapter 3. The context, as we've seen, reminds us that the traditional apostolic teaching of the New Testament is nothing short of being the Lord's own message. When we read the surrounding emphasis on commands and obedience, I believe Paul's intended meaning becomes clearer. This is a devotional thought with a purpose. For love like God's and patience like Christ's will always result in obedience.

And it's a willing-hearted obedience at that, one in which we're not to be selective, or choosy, as to what bits of the apostolic tradition we'd rather not keep today, thank you very much. How can we dare to be selective in our obedience? That's not obedience at all! Do we have similar authority to the apostles in order to select between what's a fundamental truth and what's a secondary doctrine? What part of the apostolic pattern found in our Bibles do we have the right to dispense with today? This was obviously a live issue in Paul's day. Because he goes on to say: "*Keep away from every brother who does not live according to the (apostolic) teaching.*" So it seems some were intent on ignoring what they didn't like.

The words 'keep away' make it perfectly obvious that obedience demands separation to the apostolic commands as communicated by the preaching of Paul, remembering the assurance that this is nothing other than the Lord's own message. Perhaps one specific issue for some at Thessalonica was a refusal to work (2 Thessalonians 3:6-8; 1 Thessalonians 4:11), but if that's included as important, what will we exclude as unimportant?

When disobedience to the Lord's message has to be acted upon by effecting a separation between the faithful and the unfaithful, we're into the whole subject of discipline in the local church, such as we see illustrated throughout the New Testament churches of God. It's not a popular or fashionable subject, but in the logical flow of Paul's teaching here this is where we get to. Church discipline is needed when the Christian standard is defiantly refused. In his pastoral letters, but especially here in 2 Thessalonians 3, the apostle Paul spells out the form that discipline should take. He commands them to "*admonish the unruly*" (1 Thessalonians 5:14): in other words, giving a first admonition.

Then he says "*keep away*" (2 Thessalonians 3:6): that being a measure of social ostracism if the admonition isn't heeded. "*Take special note*" (2 Thessalonians 3:14), he says: in what sounds like a public censure. Then comes the instruction "*not to associate with*" (2 Thessalonians 3:14) those who are disobedient: which must mean avoiding free and familiar fellowship with those who are unfaithful (v.15). Finally, and solemnly, he writes that they have to "*reject*" (Titus 3:10) them. This amounts to excommunication as shown in 1 Corinthians 5, or when a brother is to be "*refused*" after a second admonition.

I wonder if the practice of church discipline today has generally fallen into a measure of disuse? If so, the apostles were clearly of a different opinion. The logic of 2 Thessalonians 3 is clear: if there's to be obedience to the Word then we have a corporate responsibility (1 Thessalonians 5:12-14) to carry out discipline, one in which church leaders take the initiative. Its character and tone, of course, is to be nothing other than friendly and fraternal,

and it's always aiming at being re-constructive - always directed towards the goal of 'winning our brother'.

One final point, in sharing all this, Paul says (in v.6) that he's speaking 'in the name of the Lord Jesus'. Think about that for a moment. Nothing could demonstrate better Paul's self-conscious authority as an apostle of Christ. In fact, he expresses his confidence in an even earlier verse (v.4) when he says that the Lord will make sure that the Thessalonians will obey him! Of course, no-one has that kind of apostolic authority today. Instead, we submit to apostolic authority today by submitting to the New Testament. It still carries undiminished force. The apostolic tradition is the Lord's message as found in our Bibles - that's to be our full assurance, as it was Paul's and the Thessalonians'!

CHAPTER 2: THE CHRIST OF GOD

One outstanding feature of Paul's letter to the Colossians, if not *the* outstanding feature, is the full and detailed way it presents to us truths about the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ. There's a reason for this, of course. It was written, in part at least, as a response to the propaganda of a first century religious cult. It was written to warn Christians living in the Lycus valley (of Phrygia) about the errors of a particular false teaching which had spread there. The particular heresy in question combined some Jewish ideas with the idea of the worship of cosmic powers in the form of angelic beings. It was a distortion of the true connection between elements of the Law and angelic powers; the Law having been ordained and spoken through angels (Acts 7:53; Galatians 3:19; Hebrews 2:2).

One Bible expert believes the cult characterized these angelic powers as 'the elemental spirits of the universe' (F.F. Bruce; see Colossians 2:8,20; & also Galatians 4:3,9), based on wording which Paul himself uses. The appeal of this angel-cult lay in promising you could reach a higher level of wisdom by treating your body harshly and having minimum contact with worldly things. Jewish ideas like observing the Sabbath and new moons were thrown into the mix. Cult followers believed these angelic powers, or world-rulers, even shared in the essence of the God-head itself and had been involved in the creation of the world. So this cult, which appears to have arrived on the doorstep of the Church of God in Colossae, launched a real attack on the very

core of all Christian teaching – that which concerns the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ himself.

As early as the first chapter, the apostle Paul has been setting the record straight. In one sense we ought to be grateful to these cults, for they gave Paul the opportunity by the Spirit of God to give us one of the most magnificent and exalted descriptions of Christ in the whole Bible. From the twelfth verse, the glory of the Christ is set out like this:

“[God’s] beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. And He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation. For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities - all things have been created by Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the first-born from the dead; so that He Himself might come to have first place in everything. For it was the Father’s good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say whether things on earth or things in heaven.” (Colossians 1:13-20)

Not only is that a wonderful statement of the fact that Jesus Christ is the perfect visible representation of God, and the full embodiment of all the attributes of the Godhead, but this is a clear counter-attack on the teachings of that first century cult. Notice that Paul said all 'the fullness' of God resided in Christ.

That was him using the jargon of that particular cult. 'Fullness' was one of its 'buzz-words'. It meant the totality of the divine essence. Remember, we've said that the cult-followers falsely claimed this was shared out with angelic beings whom God, they said, had used as his agents in creating the world.

Oh no, Paul tells us, the sum of all the divine powers and attributes are contained in Christ, and through Christ - uniquely and alone - God created the world. Paul so wanted these Christians at Colossae, and at neighbouring Laodicea, to be sure of this that when we come to the second chapter we find Paul's prayer for them was:

"That their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love, and attaining to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ Himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I say this in order that no one may delude you with persuasive argument. For in Him all the fulness of Deity dwells in bodily form." (Colossians 2:2-9)

There's that word 'fullness' again, with the repeated assertion that all the divine fullness - all its powers and attributes - reside in Christ. Paul also talked in terms of hidden wisdom and knowledge. Again he was choosing his terms carefully by the Spirit of God. Had not these cult-members prided themselves in the discovery of a higher spiritual wisdom as yet undiscovered by others? They're on the wrong track, Paul says, and they're looking in the wrong place, for it's all to be found in Christ. Once again

there's the ring of Christian confidence in this assertion regarding Christ.

We spoke in the last chapter of Christian confidence in the authority of God's Word, the Bible. The Bible uses the same word, a word for 'full assurance', to describe the quality of Christian confidence we ought to have both in God's Word and in God's Son. And when we have this proper strength of biblical conviction about Jesus Christ, the Son of God - as we see him in all his glory in the Word of God - then that's a 'blessed assurance'! To have this kind of assurance in Christ, despite the assaults of cults both ancient and modern, calls for the exercise of our God-given mental powers, for Paul speaks of: "*the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of Christ*" (Colossians 2:2-3). Then, a few verses later, he expands on this true knowledge of Christ we're to have full assurance and total conviction about. He says:

"... in Him all the fulness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority. And when you were dead in your transgressions, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us and which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him.

Therefore let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day - things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ. Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels. If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees.” (Colossians 2:9-20)

Notice again how Paul denounces in the same breath both the worship of angels and submission to legalistic decrees. He's still gunning for this heresy which blended these elements together. Paul shows how the cross, at the very heart of the Christian gospel, shatters these delusions. The glorious triumph of the Christ of the cross is the final answer to them. Paul opens a window for us on the cross here, indicating something of its profound effect in heaven within the ranks of the angelic orders themselves. Things in heaven were simply not the same afterwards he tells us in chapter one (v.20), and now adds that through the cross Christ 'put off from himself' the angelic rulers and heavenly powers.

It's the same word he uses when he describes believers as having put off from themselves their old self-nature and its corrupt practices. The Lord Jesus himself described the cross as 'the hour' for the Son of Man to be glorified, when 'judgement' would come 'upon this world' and 'the ruler of this world' would be cast out (John 12:23,31). 'God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom' of God was effected through 'Christ and Him crucified' – something which the (world-) rulers of this age never under-

stood, “*for if they had understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory*” (1 Corinthians 2:7,2,8). As Christ saw the cross loom large before him, he said “*the ruler of the world is coming, and he has nothing in Me*” (John 14:30). No doubt this was a reference to Satan himself, otherwise described in the Bible as “*the prince of the power of the air*” (Ephesians 2:2).

What a cosmic victory Christ won through his death on the cross! He's the glorious Victor of a terrible spiritual battle that was hidden to human view in the darkness of his cross. The cross declares him to be the incomparable Christ. All things were created by him and through him and for him. And when this once perfect creation plunged itself into spiritual revolt against its creator, he came down to share in our humanity so that he might die sacrificially and rescue from sin all who put their trust in him. No wonder the writer to the Hebrews says: “*Let all the angels of God worship him who has become much better than the angels, as He has inherited a more excellent name than they* (Hebrews 1:6,4).

He became “*for a little while lower than the angels*” (2:7) and “*for this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name*” (Philippians 2:9).

In all we're saying, let's have the full and blessed assurance that “*there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved*” (Acts 4:12). He, and he alone, is God's beloved Son, and we should hear and do what he says (Matthew 17:5).

CHAPTER 3: THE HOPE OF HIS CALLING

Every believer can rejoice in the 'blessed hope' that's associated with "*the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Christ Jesus*" (Titus 2:13). The common hope of all believers on the Lord Jesus Christ is his soon return to take us to be with himself. In contrast to the dead-end hopes of this world which end at death, the Christian has what Peter describes in the Bible as *a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead*" (1 Peter 1:3).

The great thing about this hope of the believer's heavenly inheritance is that it's an absolutely certain hope, because it's all of God's grace. This 'salvation hope' is totally sure - it can't be made any more sure than it already is - because it doesn't depend on us, but only upon God and the once for all finished work of Christ. Not everyone agrees with that. The fact that they disagree doesn't alter the truth of it as being the Bible's clear teaching, of course. But I understand why some people have a different view. Let me take you to one of the main Bible texts they use. No-one would dispute that it really does describe the danger of 'falling away'. But instead of that thought troubling us in relation to our eternal security - and leaving us to puzzle over a contradiction with other parts of the Bible (like John 10:28) - I want to share with you exactly what it was that early believers were in danger of falling away from. It certainly wasn't their salvation. That's a totally mistaken point of view, as we'll see once we read the verses in their

proper context. They are found in the Bible letter to the Hebrews. In chapter 6, the writer deals with the case of those:

“who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God, and put Him to open shame.” (vv.4-6)

There can be no doubt about the fact that these were genuine born-again believers. They'd had a very real spiritual experience which is evidenced to us in a number of ways. But they'd fallen away. The question is, of course, fallen away from what? The letter to the Hebrews is not taken up with the hope of *our* calling (Ephesians 4:4), but it deals very fully with what is the hope of *His* calling (Ephesians 1:18), the hope of God's calling, that is, the hope or purpose God had in mind when he called us through the word of the gospel. There's a big difference between the two. The hope of our calling - our hope as those who have been called - is focused on the future: it's the return of the Lord to take us so we enter into our inheritance which is in heaven.

By contrast, the hope of God's calling, as the Bible describes it, is all about the present earthly purpose God has in calling us. Parts of the Bible like the letter to the Hebrews explain what that purpose is. The Father is seeking worshippers. The letter to the Hebrews mainly describes how believers can be the kind of worshipping people God is looking for right now as we serve him on the earth.

The high privilege of being a spiritual kingdom (Hebrews 12:28) of priests (10:22) is a privilege God grants those who, for their part, seek to attain to God's full purpose in having called them. It's God's intention that we serve him together as a priestly people - how awesome is that! The solemn thing is that it's a privilege we can forfeit, a responsibility we can fall away from. It was the collective privilege of those believers whom we read of as serving in the New Testament churches of God. It was to that 'little flock' of disciples that the Lord promised the kingdom (Luke 12:32). But it was a kingdom, an inheritance from which they could be disinherited – as for example the immoral brother was at Corinth (see 1 Corinthians 5:13 & 6:9). And this is exactly the kind of falling away which the Hebrews' letter describes.

With the Hebrew Christians the issue wasn't immoral behaviour. But at that time, Christianity, in its first century Jewish cradle, was suffering a bad press. Actually, it was much worse than that. Some of these Hebrews who had become Christians must have been under intense pressure from their Jewish families to renounce their professed new-found faith in Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ. As a result some wanted to get out of the churches of God in which Christians were then associated, as recorded in the New Testament. The writer to the Hebrews is appealing to them not to turn back, not to drift away, not to come short of God's purpose in their lives of service among God's people. The thing which would prevent them from falling away from their place among those New Testament churches of God was if they became 'fully assured' of what these churches constituted as far as God was concerned.

If only they had a clear vision of the hope set before them in this letter, the hope of God's calling – his purpose in calling a people together to worship him on earth in relation to a high priest, Jesus, living for them in the presence of God. If only they had that vision, then they would be settled in their convictions. This is where we meet the word that's our focus in this series: the word translated 'full assurance'. Listen out for it now as the writer takes up his appeal again in Hebrews chapter 6:

“... we are convinced of better things concerning you, and things that accompany salvation. For God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name, in ministering to the saints. And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end.” (vv.9-11)

Hope developing into full assurance – the full assurance of what these churches constituted as far as God was concerned: a people for God's praise. Without that assurance, these first century Jewish believers were in danger of falling away from their place in New Testament churches of God by deciding to return to Judaism. To do that would bring such high-profile damage to the Christian testimony of these churches that it would make it *“impossible to renew them again to repentance”* (v.6), that is, making return to the churches of God an impossibility for these defectors.

To be fully assured, and so not to fall away, these Hebrews were encouraged to become active in their faith: to become imitators of the saints who were actively ministering among them (v.10),

as well as imitators of those who had showed patience under trial (v.12). The writer exhorts them: "*that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.*" So they were encouraged to take hold of the hope 'set before' them like those who showed patience under trial had earlier taken hold on hope: the classic example being Abraham who held by faith to the hope that was promised him.

Abraham maintained his assurance of hope in the grand scale of God's purpose for his family despite the smallness and barrenness of his immediate domestic circumstances. But God's purpose for these Hebrews, and the privileges associated with the 'little flock', seemed to have lost its lustre for them. It seems they had begun to think that living as a Christian compared unfavourably after all with living as a Jew like their fathers had done. But the writer had a more specific point to make by directing their attention to their national founding father, Abraham. He says:

"For when God made the promise to Abraham, since He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, saying, "I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply you." in order that by two unchangeable things [that's the promise and the oath], in which it is impossible for God to lie, we may have strong encouragement, we who have fled for refuge in laying hold of the hope set before us." (vv.13,14,18)

The promised blessing of Abraham, assured by God's oath, had come to the New Testament Hebrews, as it has come to us too, as believers in Christ Jesus. Like them, we're included as 'heirs of

the promise' (v.17). That's what Paul says in Galatians (3:8,9,14). But what is this hope 'set before us' which we are to lay hold of? The hope of the Lord's coming? The hope of an inheritance reserved in heaven for us? No! The writer explains:

"This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil, where Jesus has entered as a forerunner for us, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek" (vv.19-20).

The writer draws their attention - and ours, too - to the long-promised blessing that was to be given through Abraham. God has now fulfilled his promise in Jesus Christ. Jesus is not only a living saviour, but he's a priestly intercessor. In resurrection, he's entered within the veil into God's very presence in heaven to intercede for us so that our lives of service might be preserved, so that our present privileges and future rewards may not be lost. But if we ourselves don't lay hold on that hope there's always the danger of coming short, or falling away, from God's purpose in our lives. So we see that it was to avoid falling away from the privileges that were truly theirs among God's New Testament people, that they needed to be fully assured about this matter of the hope or purpose God had in calling them. This, too, is a blessed assurance!

CHAPTER 4: THE HEART OF WORSHIP

In this chapter I'd like to share with you the last of four occurrences where we find the word meaning 'full assurance' in the New Testament of our Bibles. So far, we've already seen it used in connection with the authority of God's Word, and with the unsurpassed glory of Christ, God's Son. In the previous chapter, we were assured of the value to God when we keep the Apostolic Faith. The Word of God, the Christ of God, and keeping the Faith are all things God wants us to have real assurance about. There's one more occurrence of this word in our Bibles. It's found a second time in the letter to the Hebrews, and it's used there in connection with one of the most wonderful revelations in the Bible - certainly one of the most wonderful that we can experience now.

God wants those who are his people to have complete assurance about the experience that lies at the very heart of Christian worship. Hebrews chapter 10 verse 22 is so inviting when it says: *"Let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water."* That's drawing near to God in worship. The qualification for a right approach to God in worship is stated here using the picture language of the Old Testament. We're told (Hebrews 9:9) that things connected with the service of God's earthly house long ago, the Tabernacle, form a parable for God's people today. The priests in the days of Moses were sprinkled with sacrificial blood and washed with water be-

fore they could ever draw near to God in priestly service associated with the Tabernacle (Leviticus 8:6,30).

That's the imagery used in our Hebrews' text: our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Those New Testament believers had the awesome privilege of being in a spiritual priesthood which answered to that of Aaron and his sons long ago. But this spiritual priesthood described in the New Testament is in fact capable of approaching God in the heavenly sanctuary.

That holy place in heaven is known as the Holies, which answers to the second section of the Tabernacle long ago where the ark of the covenant was located. *"Let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water"*, the writer says. It's an experience of the heart as it's set out here, hearts that have experienced the effects of the great once-for-all sacrifice of Christ. Long ago, the high priest who had exclusive access surely entered the second section of the physical sanctuary with some degree of trepidation, for he was entering God's immediate presence when he passed through the veil to go into the innermost part of the Tabernacle. But the New Testament people of God can, with boldness, pass through the courts of heaven!

When, in the days of Moses, God descended upon Mount Sinai to prepare a people for service in his earthly sanctuary, the Bible tells us that fear and trepidation were very evident. And why not? We read that: *"The mountain ... burned with fire, blackness and darkness and tempest, and the sound of a trumpet and the voice of words, those who heard it begged that the word should not be*

spoken to them any more, so terrifying was the sight". (Hebrews 12:18-21)

God came to meet them at Mount Sinai to further the purpose that would eventually lead to the establishing of a national centre for worship at Jerusalem, the place known as Zion. And, reading Hebrews, we have to say that if Israel's meeting with God at Sinai was an awesome experience, then our birthright as Christians is to experience its even more breath-taking counterpart! For, contrasting it with Israel's approach before Mount Sinai, the writer goes on to explain to those Hebrew Christians in New Testament times:

"... you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to God the Judge of all, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant" (Hebrews 12:22-24).

Isn't that wonderful! What a revelation this is in our Bibles! A spiritual journey that brings the people of God, each week, into heaven itself - to the original Zion above, the centre of true Christian worship. Earthly Zion was only ever a copy designed to reflect characteristics of the true Zion in the presence of God above. The Hebrews' letter even speaks of a tent, a tabernacle, which the Lord himself has pitched in heaven - that's the true sanctuary, not a copy of it like the one on the desert floor in the time of Moses (Hebrews 8:1 ff). Access to God was limited in those former days, only the high priest could go right through the Tabernacle and into God's presence in the holy place. And he could only do that once per year, and only then with the blood of animal sacrifices. So here's something else by way of contrast, for

the whole New Testament people of God are now encouraged to have:

“... boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus [and to] draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water” (Hebrews 10:19-22).

But when does this experience take place? When does a spiritual priesthood today enter the heavenly holy place? There's a clear clue in the context of our featured text:

“we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water• not forsaking our own assembling together” (Hebrews 10:19-25).

In the New Testament churches we're told they 'assembled together' for the 'breaking of the bread'. That's when God's New Testament people came together to worship. They had before them the bread which focused their minds by symbolising Christ's flesh and the wine that symbolised his blood or death. Here it's stated that 'by the blood of Jesus' and 'through the veil of his flesh' they entered the holy place above where Christ serves as high priest.

Yes, there's no doubt that this experience of entering the holy place in heaven is linked in Hebrews with the theme of the people's worship. And the worship we see in the New Testament takes place when the churches gather to break bread each week. So who would want to forsake such an opportunity when by the symbols of the bread, signifying the veil that is to say His flesh, and the wine signifying his blood, we enter in upon the collective worship experience of the people of God today? Surely it's the Lord's intent that it takes place each week with the same simplicity as that inaugural occasion when the Lord broke bread with his disciples before going out to die. It's not designed to be a physically impressive performance – there are no biblical instructions about wearing special clothes or meeting in special styles of buildings - but as we realize from this Hebrews' letter something of the spiritual reality that's taking place then - we'd have to say that in these terms nothing else comes close to this in spiritual experience this side of heaven!

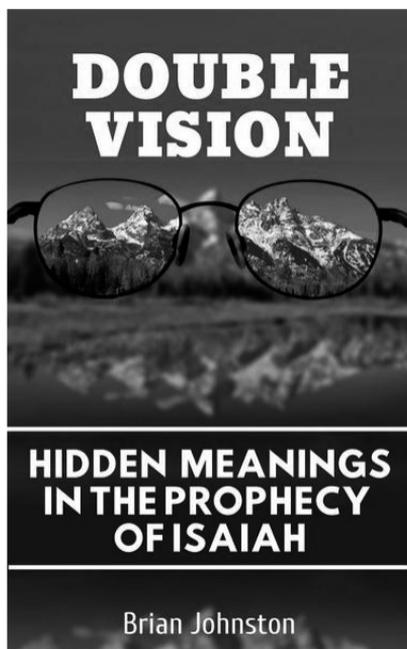
In the first century these Hebrews, including many former Jewish priests who'd become obedient to the Christian faith, had turned their back on ritual service, and priestly robes, and buildings on earth they had once regarded as sacred like the Temple at Jerusalem. How could they now look back longingly again on these things if they were looking up to the spiritual reality of entering heaven itself in their weekly worship among the churches of God?

God intended those early Christians to be so fully assured of drawing near to him in worship that he caused the apostle Peter to share a similar thought in his letter. Peter wrote in the second chapter of his first letter:

"Coming to Him as to a living stone, chosen by God and precious, you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices ...Therefore it is also contained in the Scripture, "Behold, I lay in Zion a chief cornerstone, elect, precious." (1 Peter 2:4-7)

It's obvious he's talking about worship for it has to do with the offering up of 'spiritual sacrifices'. But he speaks about 'coming to Him' - that's the Lord - 'in Zion' - that's the heavenly city of Zion. Peter, too, saw the assurance of worshipping above as basic to what it means to function as God's spiritual house on earth now. So, we've completed our biblical review of things God wants us to be fully assured about. This chapter has seen the assurance of worshipping in heaven added to that of the authority of God's Word, and the glory of Christ, and the keeping of the Apostolic Faith. The power of the Word, the glory of the Christ, the keeping of the Faith and the spiritual experience at the heart of worship are all things God wants us to have real assurance about!

Did you love *Encounters at the Cross*? Then you should read *Double Vision: Hidden Meanings in the Prophecy of Isaiah* by Brian Johnston!



The Old Testament book of Isaiah can be difficult to understand. Bibleteacher, missionary and radio broadcaster, Brian Johnston, provides the key to open up Isaiah's message by explaining the "double vision" model that God used in speaking through the prophet.

While what much of what Isaiah said had a current application to the people he was speaking to, there was usually a double meaning which either spoke of the coming of Jesus Christ hundreds of years later, or of events which are still yet in our future. This book is bound to leave you more aware of, and appre-

ciating more fully, the sovereignty of God and his gracious dealings with both Israel and followers of Jesus Christ.

Also by Brian Johnston

Healthy Churches - God's Bible Blueprint For Growth

Hope for Humanity: God's Fix for a Broken World

First Corinthians: Nothing But Christ Crucified

Bible Answers to Listeners' Questions

Living in God's House: His Design in Action

Christianity 101: Seven Bible Basics

Nights of Old: Bible Stories of God at Work

Daniel Decoded: Deciphering Bible Prophecy

A Test of Commitment: 15 Challenges to Stimulate Your Devotion to Christ

John's Epistles - Certainty in the Face of Change

If Atheism Is True...

8 Amazing Privileges of God's People: A Bible Study of Romans 9:4-5

Learning from Bible Grandparents

Increasing Your Christian Footprint

Christ-centred Faith

Mindfulness That Jesus Endorses

Amazing Grace! Paul's Gospel Message to the Galatians

Abraham: Friend of God

The Future in Bible Prophecy

Unlocking Hebrews

Learning How To Pray - From the Lord's Prayer

About the Bush: The Five Excuses of Moses
The Five Loves of God
Deepening Our Relationship With Christ
Really Good News For Today!
A Legacy of Kings - Israel's Chequered History
Minor Prophets: Major Issues!
The Tabernacle - God's House of Shadows
Tribes and Tribulations - Israel's Predicted Personalities
Once Saved, Always Saved - The Reality of Eternal Security
After God's Own Heart : The Life of David
Jesus: What Does the Bible Really Say?
God: His Glory, His Building, His Son
The Feasts of Jehovah in One Hour
Knowing God - Reflections on Psalm 23
Praying with Paul
Get Real ... Living Every Day as an Authentic Follower of
Christ
A Crisis of Identity
Double Vision: Hidden Meanings in the Prophecy of Isaiah
Samson: A Type of Christ
Great Spiritual Movements
Take Your Mark's Gospel
Total Conviction - 4 Things God Wants You To Be Fully Con-
vinced About
Esther: A Date With Destiny
Experiencing God in Ephesians
James - Epistle of Straw?
The Supremacy of Christ
The Visions of Zechariah
Encounters at the Cross
Five Sacred Solos - The Truths That the Reformation Recovered

Kingdom of God: Past, Present or Future?
Overcoming Objections to Christian Faith
Stronger Than the Storm - The Last Words of Jesus
Fencepost Turtles - People Placed by God
Five Woman and a Baby - The Genealogy of Jesus
Pure Milk - Nurturing New Life in Jesus
Jesus: Son Over God's House
Salt and the Sacrifice of Christ
The Glory of God
The Way: Being a New Testament Disciple
Power Outage - Christianity Unplugged
Windows to Faith: Insights for the Inquisitive



About the Author

Born and educated in Scotland, Brian worked as a government scientist until God called him into full-time Christian ministry on behalf of the Churches of God (www.churchesofgod.info). His voice has been heard on Search For Truth radio broadcasts for over 30 years (visit www.searchfortruth.podbean.com) during which time he has been an itinerant Bible teacher throughout the UK and Canada. His evangelical and missionary work outside the UK is primarily in Belgium and The Philippines. He is married to Rosemary, with a son and daughter.



About the Publisher

Hayes Press (www.hayespress.org) is a registered charity in the United Kingdom, whose primary mission is to disseminate the Word of God, mainly through literature. It is one of the largest distributors of gospel tracts and leaflets in the United Kingdom, with over 100 titles and hundreds of thousands despatched annually. In addition to paperbacks and eBooks, Hayes Press also publishes Plus Eagles Wings, a fun and educational Bible magazine for children, and Golden Bells, a popular daily Bible reading calendar in wall or desk formats. Also available are over 100 Bibles in many different versions, shapes and sizes, Bible text posters and much more!